THE CHINESE PUZZLE

By

MARIAN BOWER
and LEON M. LION

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CHAPTER I

Roger de la Haye walked slowly out of the open door and down the steps of a certain club in Piccadilly, and then pulled up to look at the scene before him. He was conscious of the stream of human beings who jostled him—of the men who stepped out of his way—of the women who lifted their eyes and let their glances tell such a variety of tales.

Here and there he returned the look, but without receiving or conveying any individual impression, for his mind was so taken up with the scene that in one sense was so familiar, and in another so new.

It was London in mid June; London before the War was anything more than a possibility half believed in, half regarded as a guy to frighten the timorous.

In the next house along the street, the window boxes were filled with pink geraniums, their color bleached from them by the summer night and the blaze of electricity, until they wore a transparent, intangible air.

Across the road were the railings of the park, sticking up as if they were a series of lances, held by hands that were strong and yet not visible, and beyond them were clumps of trees, their leaves leaves no longer, but the pattern in a veil of mingled mist and light; after that there was the undulating stretch of grass, which had lost its green, and was now neutral-tinted and woolly with the moisture overlaying it, while everywhere were lights and again lights, until the farthest row merged themselves in the dip of the sky, of that British sky, which was soberly

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purple and indigo, and had none of the garish effects of the Eastern one that Roger had left behind him.

To Roger de la Haye there was nothing ordinary in these lights, in these atmospheric effects. On the contrary, they held for him both the delight of rediscovery and of contrast.

Every man has a chord in his being that vibrates to one particular message sent through the perceptions. With some, it is the sight of a drop of dew on a flower, with others, the scent of a rose; again the glimmer of moonlight on water will make the lip of the hardest soldier twist. Napoleon, it was said, could never see a woman in white, walking between the trees in a green avenue, without feeling the throb of his remarkably steady pulse.

Women go less by phenomena than by association. The beauty of even the most glorious sunset is enhanced by proximity; the memory of a flower is less a thought for its color than of the hand which offered it. As for Roger, it was just that homely scent of moist earth that set his mind rejoicing now.

The smell carried him out of London to the quaint white house at Zouche de la Haye. It reminded him of all his boyish excitements, of going out to shoot a rabbit, of the tramp down the plow, of the misty October days, of the brown leaves curled up on the spikes of a hedgerow.

Latterly, since he had made up his mind to follow the same career as his father, and had set himself to understand the little a European may of the Oriental mind, he had been very rarely at Zouche. But he knew exactly how things were there. The next day he proposed to go home. The next evening, if the weather were kind, he and his mother would walk out of the long French windows across the terrace, down the steps into the garden. Lady de la Haye loved flowers. There were whole beds full of roses, red roses with a fragrance that scented a whole room, new since he was there. But the border under the Elizabethan brick wall round the bowling-green was quite unchanged, and at night the clumps of white

pinks would look like cushions for fairies to lay their heads on, just as they had done when he was seven years old and fairies were as real to him as Fido the retriever.

At this point Roger, coming back to the practical matters of the moment, began to think of what was immediately before him. It was something greater which had caused him to promise to put in an appearance at this particular dance than the mere desire of a man newly returned from distant lands for any amusement. Indeed, so little did the invitation concern him, as an invitation, that while he recollected the number of the house in Grosvenor Square, the name of his hostess had slipped from his mind.

The previous day when he had hurried to see his best friend, Paul Marketel, Paul, rather to his amusement had mentioned, with a twist about his strong mouth, that he was going to display his big person in this particular ballroom. Roger had started with the idea that he would like to go because Paul would be there, and then, as events, especially diplomatic events, have a way of doing, they took an unexpected turn, and Roger found that there would be convenience, as well as pleasure, in thus having an opportunity of seeing Paul, for he wanted to say a word or two to him on a weighty matter, under the disguise of frivolity.

Roger had returned from Pekin in a leisurely fashion. He had spent as much time as he pleased at any place which interested him, and so when he eventually found himself in London, and reported himself to the Foreign Office, he learned that China had made one of those spasmodic moves which give indications from time to time of what she might be capable, should it ever seem good to her to modernize herself, in the Western acceptance of the term.

This particular move was the proposal for a loan for the purpose of building the nucleus of a Chinese navy. The British Government was approached, and timorous, as

usual, about hurting foreign susceptibilities was inclined to temporize. At this juncture Paul Marketel stepped in. He offered to take up the loan himself, provided the British Government would participate to the extent of a benevolent interest. The proposal was accepted, and it became evident at once that not only speed was necessary to carry through the affair, but secrecy as well. The German Intelligence Service has always been particularly well served in England, and Wilhelmstrasse immediately got a hint of what was in the wind. The Far East has always been a pressing concern of the German diplomatic mind, its unavowed aim to make the vast Chinese Empire into an exclusively Teutonic sphere of influence. Therefore this navy loan was doubly disconcerting. First, because Germany resented any display whatever of Chinese initiative, and secondly, because Chinese initiative backed by British support was especially distasteful.

A note was received by the Court of St. James suggesting an international conference, and Paul knew that the only way to circumvent that move was to oppose it with the *fait accompli* of a private loan, privately arranged. It was at this point that Roger came in. There were reasons why it was particularly suitable that he should represent the British Government in the matter. He was to play that rôle as unobtrusively as possible, and with no official standing, but the arrangements for meeting and discussion were left in his hands, and it was his intention to settle these with Paul in as casual a fashion as possible, in the interval between one dance and the next.

He crossed the road before St. George's Hospital, skirting in and out of the buses and traffic congregated there; and then, as an unwished-for reminder, there came to him the remembrance of the acrid Chinese smell; of that evil odor which every Celestial city—Pekin perhaps less than most—seems to gather up and blow in whiffs, in and out, between all the holes and corners of the native houses and their compounds, and then on through those straight streets of the European Settlement which, with

their order and regularity, are a perpetual marvel and an equal irritation to the Chinese.

The Far East came to Roger by inheritance. His father, Sir Arthur de la Haye, was so pre-eminently the authority on Celestial matters, that the whole of British diplomacy in China seemed to hang on his shoulders. England never lends her representatives one ounce of unnecessary strength. They have to impress out of their own personality. If they make bricks without straw when their confrères of Russia, or Germany, are provided with substantial sheaves, then they have done no more than their duty; if they fail, the difficulty of their situation provides no extenuating circumstance. Another man is sent, and then another, until one turns up with such a combination of the essential qualities, that he effects marvels as if they were commonplaces.

Sir Arthur de la Haye was such a man. The Chinese not only feared him, but they respected him, and the respect of a Chinaman means greater things than the casual Westerner is given to supposing. He was even friendly to a limited extent with many of the Chinese officials. One man, Chi Lung, the mandarin and viceroy, whom the Dowager Empress disgraced twice, and twice recalled, because no one else was so acceptable to the Western Powers, made no secret of both friendship and affection for Sir Arthur de la Haye.

Roger never had any other thought than to follow his father. The East runs in families. India has its soldiers who, generation after generation, look to the frontier as the most inspiriting thing in life. The Chinese tradition is younger, but it is there, all the same.

Roger recalled these things with a curious sense of taking stock, as a man does before a life and death operation, or as a woman does before her baby is born, and later he was to remember this walk as the circumstance that marked the ending of the impersonal phase of his manhood.

Men go to their development by various ways. With some, ambition pushes to the front and dwarfs everything

else, for overweening ambition is a Juggernaut, which only arrives at its goal by rolling under its car not only sentiments but personalities. With other men it is a woman—and then everything depends on the lady. She either uplifts him or drags him down. Only one thing is certain. Love and a woman never leave a man where they found him. Ambition had so overtopped Roger's development, that hitherto women had played but a very secondary part in it. Chi Lung (who had watched over him since his father's death, displaying an interest and affection that had something paternal in them) never hesitated to say that this was the triumph of the Oriental education over the Western inheritance. The Celestial imagined—or chose to make himself think—that his teaching had relegated women in Roger's mind to the position of "honorable baggage,"—the accepted Chinese attitude.

Anyway, fancy-free, Roger turned out of Grosvenor Place, through the connecting streets and on to the great square. There the bustle, the lights, the music, the group, either side of the awning, of those poor souls who gather to catch what glimpse they may of a feast to which they will never be bidden, pointed out his destination. He pulled up a moment. The name of his hostess floated, hovered, near to his consciousness.

"Hip——" he murmured. "Hippeley——" Then he had it.

"Tippley-Smith."

He walked up the felt-carpeted steps, received the number for his hat, and began that work of time and difficulty —getting up the staircase in a crush.

The Tippley-Smiths had but lately arrived, by translation from Balham, to Grosvenor Square. An only child, and a successful patent for compressed turpentine, were responsible for the ascension, and now, since an income in five figures and judicious effacement could do most things, when humanity was filling up that measure of vulgarity which was to receive the purification of self-sacrifice only a year or two later, they were so far established in Society

that their guests for the most part looked at the girl, looked at the house, and forgot the father and mother. It was a bargain, and all bargains necessarily require one side to propose terms and the other to accept them.

Roger had just attained to the bend of the staircase, when he happened to look ahead. Already he had been greeted by several people who knew him, by more who made the "I knew your father, I knew your mother" their medium of introduction. He replied to them genially, and was not in the least taken in. Without actually formulating the thought in so many words, he was perfectly aware that Sir Roger de la Haye, young, rich, and a rising diplomat, was not an acquaintance to be neglected.

But as Roger lifted his eyes he forgot all social possibilities, noble or ignoble. A face arrested him. He looked again. He was still more interested. He saw a girl, who had yet something womanish in her finished pose, in the air of quiet but certain self-possession. The next moment one of those high head feathers, the fashion of the hour, got between him and the girl's face. He could only catch glimpses of a knot of golden hair, of the outline of an exceedingly white shoulder.

Impatiently Roger waited his turn to make his bow to his hostess, who stood just without the door of the ballroom. As impatiently, once within the long room, empty of furniture save for that row of benches close to the wall where the chaperons sat, looking for all the world (as a keen critic of human nature once said) like the vultures watching on the Towers of Silence—he gazed about for the one face he wished to study.

He found it, and noticed that the girl was accompanied by an exceedingly well-preserved woman, presumably her mother. His training, which had taught him that a trifle is often the surest indication of a wide-sweeping truth, caused him to remark the expression on that woman's face. It wore that eager, alert look of one who has not so many acquaintances that they can afford to let a single friendly individual go by. "New to London"—he said to himself.

None the less, though the mother and daughter might be just outside this particular ring—(factions herd, each in their own flock, as if they were sheep, expecting to be rounded up by a collie)—Roger knew that they were no strangers to Society.

The situation interested him less than the girl. He looked about for someone to introduce him. Several times he drifted away, more than once he came back to find only the mother there. At last his perseverance was rewarded, he found a mutual acquaintance, made his bow, and learned that this girl, who already intrigued him more than all the other girls in the room put together, was a certain Miss Melsham, Miss Naomi Melsham.

"I suppose," remarked Mrs. Melsham, as Roger lingered by her while another man claimed Naomi for a waltz, "that you are tired of hearing that people knew your father or mother."

Roger looked up with a half-laugh. This was the note of the evening, and it amused him to see that Mrs. Melsham was quick enough not to strike it, even by implication, without letting him know that she was aware he might think it was being played too often.

Roger murmured that he was only too pleased when people talked to him of his parents.

"Then," went on Mrs. Melsham, "you won't mind if I tell you that long ago my husband knew your father. He was in Pekin, in the consular service. He didn't stay long, out in China. You know the climate there. I have often heard him talk of Sir Arthur de la Haye. Of course," and now the eyes looked up quickly, "that was before I married. My husband left the service and settled in Nice. We lived there until he died. Then my girl and I thought we would like to travel. I am afraid to say for how many years we have been vagabonds. This is the first time we have been in London for a season. It was suddenly borne in on me what a neglectful mother I was. Naomi has not even been presented."

Roger considered Mrs. Melsham more carefully. With

her regular features, she might be any age from forty to fifty. Her complexion was carefully but not blatantly improved. Her hair was dressed with an attention to detail that nine out of ten Englishwomen forget. To omit her diamonds would disturb the average British matron to the point of discomfort: purposeless wisps down the back of her neck leave her quite complacent.

Roger looked impatiently down the room. The women's dresses were making shifting, changing combinations of color, the breeze was coming in from the open window, and the hum of voices followed it from the balcony, yet, all at once, he became conscious of a feeling of hurry. It was as if he had been running hard and was out of breath.

There followed a sharp recoil, a sense of danger. He looked towards the door. There was an instant when he meditated leaving then and there.

"Here is my daughter," quickly remarked Mrs. Melsham at his elbow.

Roger started, he watched Naomi coming down the room, and his look was so earnest that Mrs. Melsham suppressed a peculiarly fine smile. Bending down, as if to put straight a fold of her gown, she edged away a pace. It was Roger, not she, who should receive Naomi from her last partner.

The girl came up. She looked sharply past Roger to her mother, and as she did that her face seemed to freeze, to grow old, with that age which is due, not to the passing of time, but to experience.

"Our dance, Miss Melsham," said Roger.

The music had begun, the room was filling anew. Naomi looked up. Roger understood that she was pleased to dance with him, and was filled with the marvel of it. There came to him that sense of wonder which is the first sign that the door of the heart is about to swing back. He felt that he had nothing to say, that the small talk, ordinarily appropriate to such occasions, was not only futile but ridiculous. There seemed to be great issues in the back of his consciousness, but when he asked himself what these

issues might be, a turn of his mind assured him that there were none there at all.

Naomi and he walked a few steps down the room. He was just about to put his arm round her waist, when a tall man came up to him.

"Hullo!" said Roger.

The big man nodded casually, but Roger asked Naomi's permission and stepped a pace away.

The two men said only a very few words to each other. Naomi did not intend to listen, and yet she was so interested she had to look that way.

"Better make it next Saturday," said Roger; "I've fixed up the other."

"Then I'll appear as the unexpected guest," the big man said.

"Capital," Roger returned, as this big man, with bulk as well as height, and a face which arrested attention by its air of strength and command, passed along.

It was evident that in some way he was a personage. An old woman, with three strings of diamonds on a lean neck, put out her hand and touched his arm with her fan.

"Who is he?" asked Naomi, as Roger came back to her.

"That's Paul Marketel. Don't you know him?"

Naomi shook her head.

"Most people know Paul, or know of him," continued Roger. "He is a great financier."

"Where money is there will the grabbing fingers be gathered together," said Naomi suddenly, sharply.

Roger answered quite seriously. It is perhaps inevitable that a diplomat who was at once so young and so successful should lose his lightness of touch. Only maturity can take cleverness with a shrug of the shoulders.

"No," Roger demurred, "Paul isn't that kind. His honesty is proverbial."

"And yet he is a financier," insisted Naomi.

"Because he is a financier," corrected Roger. "I once heard him say that honesty isn't only good policy, it's confidence lent out at compound interest."

Naomi's lips curled disdainfully.

"It's so easy to be honest on an income of five figures," she said.

Roger looked up sharply. He was unpleasantly conscious of some unexpressed implication. But, since that supposed disagreeable things, as he would have phrased it, he shut his mind to the impression. He forgot that if you want to arrive at the truth—cultivate a memory for trifles. It is the first article of a diplomat's creed.

"Paul was not always rich," he went on—"he has quite a history—and," he added, with that everlasting resentment of the male for a woman who does less than her duty to the young and defenseless—"a stepmother."

"A stepmother!" Naomi returned. "That rather sounds as if he had suffered at her hands."

"He did," answered Roger briefly.

"And now, when the tables are turned?" the girl went on.

"Paul is always kind—but he pleads a previous engagement as often as the dear lady wishes to see him."

Roger finished the sentence abruptly. He wondered what had made him so expansive about his friend's affairs.

"I think," exclaimed Naomi, breaking in on the misgiving of the man before her, "that I could bear anything better than contemptuous generosity. It would force one to be silent, and suffering for one's sins in silence must be almost as bad as being asked to kiss the rod with a smile.

She spoke hotly. Her voice vibrated. Afterwards—not once, but many times afterwards—she recollected what she had said: how she had defined the penalty of silence and marked out the torture of it.

As for Roger, the effect on him was immediate but evanescent.

He perceived that Naomi Melsham was evidently capable of thinking out certain problems—of facing certain eventualities. But again, he had noticed that her touch was curiously variable. Sometimes she betrayed all the sure-

ness of participation—sometimes a thing might have been remote from her—a theory, and the odd part was that it was just the meaner, less lovely aspects of Life which she approached as though she had a more complete knowledge of them.

CHAPTER II

"You know," protested Roger, as he came out on to the steps of the Tippley-Smiths' house, "it is ever so early. We have hardly got halfway through the program and you promised me another dance at least."

"Mama thinks we must go," murmured Naomi vaguely.

"We must be going on," amended Mrs. Melsham. "I especially promised we would put in an appearance at an old friend's house."

She spoke both explicitly and with decision. But the truth was the other engagement was a creation of her own brain, and her early departure a sudden resolution born of the events of the evening. Roger was so evidently attracted, he had hovered so persistently round Naomi, that Mrs. Melsham deemed it wise to take her daughter away while the impression was both vivid and compelling. Overemphasis, she held, especially in attraction, tends to a final blur.

She came out and stood at the head of the long flight of white steps, looking down in a leisurely fashion. Naomi and Roger were behind her, and she saw no reason either to curtail their leave-taking or to watch it with an openly observant eye.

A striped awning descended from the door to the pavement, and within that awning was a powerful electric bulb; therefore, as she moved well forward along the step, her face was very visible to that fringe of sad humanity still keeping vigil, one or two deep, on either side of the pavement.

"Please ask a policeman to call a taxi," she said over her shoulder.

Roger was a moment before he answered; then he came

to her side and looked down the steps. With his tall figure, and the contrasting black and white of his evening dress, he was even more noticeable than Mrs. Melsham herself.

No blue-coated representative of the law appeared to be in sight, and so a man detached himself from the crowd.

"'Ere!" he cried out, with a suspicion of a foreign accent in his raucous voice; "I'll get a taxi. What name, Sir?"

Mechanically, Roger gave his own, and the man, instead of turning immediately away, pushed himself on to the strip of red felt and looked up the steps. His first glance was for Roger, an appraising scrutiny, then the prominent eyes traveled onwards, and impelled by that force which makes one look back at a person staring hard, Mrs. Melsham's eyes went straight to meet the stare. She took in the outline of a heavy form, the unhealthy appearance of a large face, bloated, and yet whitened, as if it had been for months, possibly for years, shut up where there was a lack of sunshine. She remarked that the man was shabby, that he was unmistakably a foreigner, but she saw too that the eyes were as intelligent, as acute, as they were insolent and cruel.

She stepped back, swayed as if she were about to lose her foothold. She pushed so sharply against her daughter that her purpose might have been to hurry within the house and hide herself, and then she laughed uncertainly.

"Mama!" exclaimed Naomi. "What is it? You are not ill again."

Mrs. Melsham steadied herself. Naomi's exclamation told her that she was betraying her agitation, and then following that there came the impulse to push the question of her health angrily aside. She resented as much as the breath of a hint that physically she could be on the wane.

The woman whose charms have greatly attracted is scarcely ever a valetudinarian. It is only she who all her life long has been denied the thrill of admiration, who makes ill health the pathetic last bid for attention.

It was true, Mrs. Melsham had felt—well—not quite so

buoyant as usual,—it was true she had gone secretly to a physician, and had heard from him that nothing was organically wrong, only she would do well to live quietly for a time—the very last thing she ever intended to do—but now when she was about to tell Naomi, impatiently, to mind her own business, Roger's face checked her.

"Men," she reminded herself, "were all creatures with a blind belief in theory. They put their faith in formulae. One of these was what she called contemptuously "the dear daughter persuasion." So, now, if it pleased this infatuated young man to glow with approbation at Naomi's tactless remark, she was certainly not going to disturb his impression.

At that moment the shabby foreigner, with the collar of an ancient broadcloth coat turned up about his ears, until it half shadowed his face, came back hanging on the steps of the taxi. He held open the door, and there was just another moment before Mrs. Melsham could bring herself to go down the steps. As she stepped into the vehicle, she was careful not to look near the beggar.

Roger handed out a tip without a glance either, and for once Naomi had no attention to bestow on outside affairs.

"You will let me come and call on you tomorrow," murmured Roger, making his voice low, on purpose that the answer might come from her and not from her mother.

The girl hesitated. Roger looked at her in dismay. Was she going to refuse? Why should she refuse when she had been gracious to him all the evening?—and then she faltered that they were staying at the Cleveland Hotel.

A policeman came up, and showed symptoms of wishing to hurry them off. Roger put his head in at the window for a final good-by, and the taxi man gruffly suggested that he did not know his fare's destination.

"209 Parchester Terrace. Of course, how stupid of me!" said Mrs. Melsham.

It took the driver a moment longer to make sure of the exact lie of the address, and then Roger stood, bareheaded, out on the curb, until the taxi disappeared.

He had a feeling of being cut short; it was as if a shutter had come down and blocked out the sun, so that what, a moment before, had been a brilliantly lighted room was now a gloomy dungeon. He went up the steps, glancing at his watch. It was a little past one now; at the earliest he could not present himself at the Cleveland Hotel much before noon next day. The eleven hours between seemed endless, and then, as he reached the entrance, and so far recollected himself as to put his hand into his pocket for the ticket for his coat, Paul Marketel crossed him on the step.

It was perfectly natural that while Paul Marketel lighted his cigarette Roger should exchange a word with him. They did not say a single syllable the whole world might not have heard. They both of them knew their business too well to risk as much as a reference to Zouche in such a situation, but the alien, who had retired to his first position on the back fringe of the row, peered between two shabby shoulders to have a better view.

"There's two toffs for you if you like," he remarked.

"That's Marketel," his neighbor informed him in a grudging voice. "He could buy up half London they say, could Marketel."

"I haf seen him before," answered the alien dryly, and after that as if he had finished something, or accomplished something, he swung round and walked with an alert step, quite out of keeping with his ragged appearance, on the shadowy side of the square, until he came to the first turning out of it.

As for Mrs. Melsham, she only waited until they were safely out of the range of observation.

"My dear," she gasped, and she clutched Naomi's arm, "did you see that man?"

"What man?" inquired Naomi indifferently.

"The man of course who fetched the taxi."

"No," answered the girl, and pointedly she turned her face and looked out of the window. She wanted to be left alone with her thoughts. She wanted to look out on to

the streets and drink in the mysterious spirit of the night; to look at silent house after silent house, and to imagine all the warmth, all the glow of a romance that possibly was being lived in one if not in all of those high uniform dwellings. The very street lamps, casting their wedges of light across the road, had a beauty in her eyes which she had never seen before. The face of Roger de la Haye came flashing into her mind, then disappearing and flashing again, just as a revolving lantern turns facet after facet of brightness on to an expanse of ocean.

Naomi's experience of admiration had been by no means happy. Until she was nearly seventeen she had lived with an old aunt, her father's sister, in Lausanne. When this aunt died, Mrs. Melsham had no alternative but to take her daughter to live with her. This particular winter she rented a villa in Nice, and kept Naomi as much as she could in the background, until to her mingled dismay and satisfaction she found that there were certain possibilities of usefulness about a beautiful girl just passing from childhood to womanhood.

Naomi herself was bewildered. Everything was so utterly unlike the ordered life in Lausanne, then, for she was naturally quick, and Mrs. Melsham did not think it worth while to be guarded, she began to understand and to resent. But the outcome of her first revolt was a bitter sense of defeat. Mrs. Melsham told her she was both green and a fool, and openly parodied Naomi's scruples, for the entertainment of a group of her own best friends. The girl heard, and sat still, tingling in every vein. It seemed easier to acquiesce than to resent: besides, resentment was obviously so useless, so she drifted down the line of least resistance, until, one afternoon, an individual of nondescript nationality called Hermann Strum, and a very young Frenchman, who believed, when he entered the room, that Mrs. Melsham was a much maligned woman, came to play cards at the Villa.

What followed left an indelible impression on Naomi's mind. There had been an altercation at cards, and not

even Mrs. Melsham's aplomb could explain away certain discrepancies. Hermann Strum saw in the occasion an opportunity too good to be lost; he rose indignantly, and declared that he was out of pocket by at least a thousand francs.

Mrs. Melsham, shrill for once, denied that there was anything wrong at all, or if there had been—giving herself away—it was a matter of a single deal, and therefore of fifty francs at the most.

But Strum, banging his thick fist on the table (for a German always must be physically brutal), swore that if there were any haggling as to the figures, he would settle the whole question at the bar of local opinion. Or, since he was not what he himself would call an unreasonable man, and he said this with a cold sneer—if the cash were short, he was prepared to recollect that there was a daughter—a charming daughter.

He got no farther than that; the leer on his face—the white misery on Naomi's, forced Armand de Rochecorbon's chivalry.

At first he had been inclined to withdraw, to disassociate himself ostentatiously, from the whole unsavory atmosphere. Now, he pushed himself to the table; he flung his note case before Strum.

"I am satisfied that the mistake has nothing to do with Mademoiselle," he declared. "There are three thousand francs there," pointing to the case, "you shall have the other two tomorrow morning." And, in face of this diversion, Mrs. Melsham—alone equal to the occasion—thanked the little Frenchman for what she called "so opportune an advance"—and spoke airily of repayment.

Hermann Strum disappeared as suddenly as he came.

Since then, Naomi Melsham had never touched quite so low a depth, but again and again she had since realized that admiration, in the men she met, lacked the very quality which, secretly, she most longed for it to possess.

Now, the one thing her thoughts insisted on was that

there was no leer in Roger de la Haye's ardent glance, no reservation in his estimate of her.

Naomi Melsham made up her mind that there should be this one white flower in her garden of remembrance. If she and Roger met again a few times, if they danced together a few times more, he should take his leave believing the best of her. That was the utmost for which she hoped.

As for Mrs. Melsham, she contemplated the outline of Naomi's neck and the round of the well-dressed hair, with an enigmatical smile. Once she seemed about to speak, and then, with a shrug of her shoulders, she checked herself. What she had to say would not become less unwelcome if she blurted it out at once. On the other hand, Naomi might be more amenable if she was given time to estimate present possibilities and was then confronted with the sequel to past facts.

Mrs. Melsham waited until the taxi was halfway down Piccadilly, and then she let down the window. She put out her head.

"Drive to the Cleveland Hotel," she told the man; "I've changed my mind. It's too late to go on to Parchester Terrace tonight."

"I'll come into your room. I want to speak to you," said Mrs. Melsham, as she and her daughter stood on the narrow top landing of the big hotel.

Naomi held open the door, and her mother entered without taking any notice of the obvious unwillingness, sat down on the one cane chair with a careful thought to her dress, removed her gloves and smoothed them out finger by finger.

"I suppose they only put people's maids as a rule into such a room as this," she observed.

"We asked for the cheapest," Naomi murmured.

"And we have to go without lunch three days a week, and to pretend we are dining out two more, to live here at all," Mrs. Melsham amended.

Naomi sat down on her bed and turned her face away. She had an inkling of what was coming, and so distasteful was it, that she put up her hand to extinguish the electric light. Then she desisted. Mere darkness would never make her mother hold her tongue.

"I really think, my dear," Mrs. Melsham began, moving round to look squarely at Naomi, "that you have made a conquest—and quite a useful one too. Not before we need it, but then 'the Lord does provide,' as your old aunt would have said."

Naomi sprang up. This was none the less horrible because she had expected it. She drew herself up, and her golden hair caught and held all the light, but there was something repellent in the hostility of her whole form.

"Please understand, Mama," she began—"tonight is not to lead to any of your commercial speculations."

"My dear Naomi," retorted Mrs. Melsham, for the mother and daughter were given to very plain speech when they were by themselves—"there are times when you are such a fool that I wonder how you came to be my daughter."

"And I, Mama," flung back Naomi, "wonder if you know how ashamed you sometimes make me."

Mrs. Melsham laughed contemptuously; none the less she looked up warily. She wanted an understudy, not a critic. There would be months together when Naomi appeared as if she accepted the rôle, and then all at once she would set herself stonily recalcitrant. Not that Mrs. Melsham habitually indulged in practices that would bring her under the social law, but, being one of those people who desire to live at the rate of a thousand a year on two hundred, she was driven to expedients. Now, expedients with a woman usually mean the sale, direct or indirect, of her charms, as long as she has any to offer—and of someone else's when her own are things of the past.

"I think," she went on now, "that you had better hear what I have to say before you mount such a very high horse of disinterested virtue."

"What can you have to say?" demanded the girl.

Mrs. Melsham rose and faced her daughter.

"Merely this," she said, "that if I had not known that Hermann Strum was dead, I would have sworn that he was the ragamuffin who fetched that taxi for us."

"Hermann Strum!" cried out Naomi. "It's like everything that has happened to me all my life, that *he* should reappear tonight."

"I don't suppose," suggested Mrs. Melsham tranquilly, "that whenever he turned up he'd be particularly welcome."

"Mama," said Naomi, with a catch in her voice, "tell me—what made us think that Hermann Strum was dead?"

"It was said all over Nice that he had been arrested as a spy, and you know what happens to spies."

"Then it was only a rumor that he was dead?" the girl asked.

"Everyone seemed sure that he was a spy," Mrs. Melsham went on. "Of course," she continued, blandly ignoring inconvenient facts, "had I known his *métier*, I should never have had him at the Villa."

"Then," summed up Naomi, "there was no real foundation for what you told me. When you assured me you knew Hermann Strum was dead—you were merely inventing."

"Not at all," retorted Mrs. Melsham, "I was repeating what people said. Besides, don't you think if he'd been alive he'd have tracked us down before now to see what he could get out of us?"

"Yes," said Naomi, amazed as she still was to find that her mother could make the most damaging admission with an air of injured tranquillity. "I suppose he would have come to blackmail."

"My dear," remonstrated Mrs. Melsham, "what a way to put it! Don't you think your habit of using big words about small occasions is a mistake? It might give people a false impression. A little altercation at cards does not

quite imply that an unprincipled man has the whip-hand of one."

"A little altercation at cards!" cried back Naomi. "You know what Hermann Strum called it. You know what Armand de Rochecorbon knew it to be. You know what Hermann Strum demanded as the price of his silence."

The girl covered her face with her hands. The humiliation, the pain, the very fear, had left one clear thing behind, and that was a great longing for the ordered, the open, in life.

Mrs. Melsham watched the shudder.

"You see," she said—"I was right. You will be wise if you take the good things which come your way. If the worst comes to the worst, and it is Hermann Strum, he is more likely to be reasonable if he sees we have some useful acquaintances."

"Mama," declared the girl, "if you say another word, I'll never see Roger de la Haye again."

"It would be rather like cutting off your nose to spite your own face," Mrs. Melsham retorted.

"Understand," said Naomi, "that if Sir Roger does come to call, if he does wish to pursue the acquaintance, you are to get nothing out of him."

"Hermann Strum is just the kind of man to be extortionate," Mrs. Melsham murmured.

"I don't care!" the girl cried back. "Neither Hermann Strum nor anyone else shall force me to be a cat's-paw again."

Mrs. Melsham always knew when she was worsted. She gave up the argument now, and abruptly said good-night. The morning, she thought, might bring Naomi to a more pliable frame of mind.

The girl passed a wretched night. She expected a visit from Hermann Strum before breakfast, then as the morning passed she began to wonder how much of the story Mrs. Melsham had invented. After all, when she came to examine the statements, her mother merely said that she

fancied she saw a resemblance between the beggar and this Hermann Strum.

"I believe mama wished to frighten me into doing what she wanted," Naomi told herself bitterly. She didn't quite see the usefulness of the move or its clear connection with any scheme of aggrandizement, but she had experience enough to know that Mrs. Melsham would travel down a very long road, the better to turn the corner of her particular scheme.

A little before midday came a telephone message from Roger, to inquire if Miss Melsham was rested, and if he might take her and her mother to lunch at Candidale's, the fashionable restaurant of the moment.

"That's six shillings off our weekly bill," remarked Mrs. Melsham, "and if you can engineer him into dinner tomorrow, I may get through this week without cashing another check."

Naomi looked at her mother. After all her passionate protests, Mrs. Melsham was calculating possible gains as calmly as if not a word had been said.

"Please remember," Naomi cried out now, "that if I did what I ought I should declare I was too tired to lunch today, and be out when Sir Roger calls tomorrow. But I want to see him again. It's so refreshing to be with someone who takes it for granted one is honest—really honest, I mean. I wish Sir Roger to go on thinking that, so please don't forget your purse. If you do, he won't pay for the taxi back for us, I can promise you, and it's no use seeing a pretty hat in any shop window, he won't go in with you to buy it."

"I think," murmured Mrs. Melsham, reduced to plaintiveness, a rôle she very rarely played, "that you forget that men like, really like I mean, to pay for little things here and there."

"Not as you make them do it," the girl retorted.

She took a turn up and down the cramped little room.

"Oh!" she burst forth. "Do you think I haven't seen? If you don't care, I do. Men amuse themselves with you

and me. You are a good sort. I'm a fine girl. But they say we are on the make. Oh! it's intolerable to be treated so lightly."

"And why are we treated so lightly, as you call it?" Mrs. Melsham asked, then answering her own question, she added, "Because we are poor."

"No!" protested Naomi, "because we are mercenary."

Mrs. Melsham shrugged her shoulders and let the argument go by default. She played the charming mother all through lunch, and breathed more freely when the day went by and there was no sign of Hermann Strum.

As for Roger the negotiations for the Chinese loan provided him with a very good excuse for not leaving town, but he knew that had there been no Chinese *pourparlers* he would still have lingered. As it was, this very business set a term to his stay in London.

It was arranged that certain individuals should meet at Zouche, and continue their negotiations under the disguise of a week-end visit. But, as a precaution to insure secrecy, and the passing of the visitors as mere units in a social function, one or two friends were to be added to the party.

There, Roger determined, was his opportunity. He intended Naomi Melsham to be of that party. He knew he ought to include her mother, but even his prepossession could not blind him to the fact that his mother and Naomi's had nothing in common. Mrs. Melsham played her part skilfully, for Roger concluded she was rather silly, when, in truth, she was over-clever.

Love can be strangely blind. One hour of great passion is worth a procession of dull days, but the outcome of it is always a conspicuous success or an equally great failure. There's no middle term with anything that has so nearly touched the skies.

It was Mrs. Melsham herself who settled the difficulty. She hinted that the Tippley-Smiths had asked her to help them through their first country house parties, but that she was hesitating on Naomi's account.

"My daughter is fastidious," she said softly. "These Tippley-Smiths are rather blatantly new."

Roger sighed with relief, not at the Tippley-Smiths' lack of generation but because Mrs. Melsham was engaged, and she, who caught most side winds, probably heard him and understood.

He went to the telegraph office the moment he left the hotel. He had already told his mother about Naomi: when she received his telegram, she would send an invitation at once.

The invitation to Zouche was perhaps the last thing Naomi Melsham anticipated. For the first time she allowed herself really to think of the possibility of enduring relations. She had been conscious for days of a certain new warmth about her heart, but she had feared that if not tomorrow, then the day after, the glow would be extinguished. But, above all, she was grateful to Roger de la Haye. We like supremely the people who show us our best self, how much more did Naomi feel about the man who told her twenty times a day, by direct statement as well as by implication, that he took it for granted she could not have an unworthy side?

Mrs. Melsham's jubilation, of course, provided the recoil.

"There is sure to be a house party," she remarked. "I hope there'll be some 'names' among them. My people like 'names,' and it will do me good to include my daughter in the list."

Included among Mrs. Melsham's various expedients for adding to her income was what she called a certain amount of journalism. In reality it meant that she retailed gossip. At Nice, in the winter, certain people liked to see themselves in the "Doings of Our Compatriots"—so, for "considerations"—of varying kinds—Mrs. Melsham supplied the editor with descriptions of what these dear souls had on their backs, and at whose parties they were "remarked." As a rule she went on to some summer resort and repeated

the gossip there; this time she had sent what she called a "few pars" from London to a Paris paper.

"I am not sure that I shall go to Zouche," cried Naomi hotly, "if I can't go there without dragging business into it."

"Then, my dear," flashed back Mrs. Melsham, "I hope you'll find accommodation for yourself while I go and stay at the Tippley-Smiths'. You gave yourself such airs about their party at Aix that they don't want you again."

"You know," returned Naomi dully, "that I haven't a penny in my purse."

"Then earn a shilling or two by sending me something exciting from Zouche; besides," went on Mrs. Melsham, "you aren't a child. You must know that we have been spending much more than we could afford this last week. All in your interest. If we don't both of us get free board and lodging until I can recoup a bit, we shall have to sing in the streets for our supper."

Mrs. Melsham might have stated her financial position in highly colored terms, but what she said was substantially true. Nevertheless her lack of means did nothing to prevent her paying a visit to an expensive dressmaker as soon as Naomi was at liberty to accompany her.

The girl had given in. There was her heart to urge her, there was that convenient excuse—the force of driving circumstances. Besides she knew nothing of a conversation on the telephone between Madame Emilie Marie and her mother. Madame had said something about a long bill to pay, and Mrs. Melsham had not hesitated to declare that there was a very fair chance that her daughter's patronage in the future would be well worth a little elasticity in the present. "Let her get to Zouche, and then send in your account. It may be a useful reminder," Mrs. Melsham cynically advised.

For the rest, she spared neither time nor trouble. Mrs. Melsham's taste in dress was the only unimpeachable thing about her, and every garment she selected for Naomi struck just the right note.

The girl came very near to being softened by all this solicitude displayed for her, and then, just when nine mothers out of ten would have been reticent, Mrs. Melsham's levity overcame her.

"This looks like business," she remarked. "I hope you will remember, my dear, that where a man is concerned, it's pace that pays. Rush him and he'll adore you —at least, until after the wedding day,—give him time to think and he'll recollect another woman whose gowns fit better than yours do."

Naomi heard. She was in the taxi, her boxes were up before. She sat back white and cold, until she was out of sight, and then with a sob she put both her hands over her face.

"Give me a chance," she whispered, "and I'll play straight. Dear God!" she went on. "I ask nothing so much as to play straight."

CHAPTER III

THE De la Hayes had been at Zouche for more than two hundred years.

There is a little ring of country in East Anglia which has twice received a distinct impression from France. Once, after the Edict of Nantes, when the Huguenots poured across the Channel, once when colonies of Royalist exiles lived in and about the little town of Bury St. Edmunds. There was a Flemish occupation too, then farther back a Danish, but it is the Gallic that remains an influencing factor even to this day.

The De la Hayes were Huguenots. They owed it to Madame de Maintenon and her proselytizing zeal that they became English.

A fortunate marriage with the last child of the old Zouche family brought the house and the surrounding estate into the hands of the exiles. There they held from father to son, always prudent, always astute, always careful to keep up the French tradition, until, when Sir Arthur was a young man, one of the beams in the wide hall chimney of the old oak and plaster house caught fire, and it was burnt to the ground.

Sir Arthur immediately set to work to build it up again, but in a fashion which local opinion decided to be "wonderful queer." He took for his model that château on the Loire from which his family sprang. So now the house consisted of a long white body, with a row of French windows opening on to a terrace, finished off at either end with round towers, each topped with a circular pointed roof. To either end was added a one-storied wing, and at the opposite side to the terrace was an entrance, led up to by a double flight of steps, protected by railings of wrought iron, of workmanship fine enough for *le Roi Soleil* himself.

Hardly a thing had been saved from the old house, so Sir Arthur brought over his collection of *chinoiserie,* and added to it as long as he lived. His was a many-sided nature. He was a fine musician; he had a considerable talent for sketching in water colors; his reputation as a judge of Chinese art was world-wide. It is only mediocrity that must concentrate to exclusion, since it has not strength enough to be at the same time pre-eminent and diffuse.

It was not until Zouche was habitable again that Sir Arthur married Amabelle Meddleton. Lady de la Haye was many years younger than her husband. She thought him the cleverest man in the world, and had no hesitation in saying so. Happily she could worship with a dimple on her cheek and a twinkle in her eye. Admiration without a sense of humor is provocative; admiration leavened with wit is infectious. She became hardly less of a power than her husband. Her fine touch soothed many an irritable diplomatic nerve. It was tacitly understood that certain people were to be turned over to her just because her hand was so light. Success never came near to spoiling her, because she never got over the wonder of it. It is only when one begins to take the praise of men as one's due that the world thinks of withholding it.

When Sir Arthur died, Amabelle returned to England. Hers was not a fashionable grief, so it did not require distraction. She did not even try to assemble those house parties which had been one of the brilliant features of Sir Arthur's rare holidays. Neither he nor his wife had ever thought themselves obliged to comply with the Pauline injunction to suffer fools gladly, but their guests had often been more than so many pleasant men and women come to eat and sleep and talk from Friday until Tuesday. They were often diplomats, glad of a friendly discussion on neutral ground.

A wit (cynical, perhaps, because he was not included) once said that at Zouche the first article of an international agreement came into being between two mouthfuls

of marmalade at breakfast. It was discussed in all its bearings, as Lady de la Haye called her guests' attention to her latest rose in the walled-in garden, and finally settled before midnight over a cigar in the Chinese writing-room.

But all this was in the former times, and Lady de la Haye had never been more sensible of that gulf fixed between the old and the new than she was on the day following Roger's return to Zouche. He had been in London rather more than a week. His mother had hurried up to greet him on his actual arrival, and as she waited to see him step out of the boat train at Victoria (for he had come overland from Marseilles), and caught a glimpse of his eager face, she told herself with a feeling of very great gladness that her boy was still her boy. The hours which followed were peculiarly impressed on Amabelle de la Haye's mind. The mother and son had been apart for five years, and manhood ripens and crystallizes between twenty-seven and thirty-three. But though she had schooled herself to accept it if it were there, there had been no reservation in his affection towards her. They talked of most things, of Zouche, of his work, of the East, even of their prejudices and their likings, but there had been no mention of a woman as a woman. Lady de la Haye understood Roger had come back, as he went, heart-whole.

The next morning she returned to Zouche, expecting Roger to join her the following day, and instead she received a telegram saying he was detained. At first, as she fluttered the pink sheet, she was so elated that she had hardly time for her own disappointment.

"The Foreign Office is keeping him," she said half aloud. "It shows he's indispensable. When a diplomat is indispensable, then his career is made."

All the rest of that day she had barricaded her heart against any feeling of loneliness with dreams of Roger's future, of his importance. She wanted no gratification of the man as an individual, she wished for appreciation as a

hall mark of competence. Sir Arthur had served his country selfishly, he had asked for abnegation from his wife where his official work was concerned, and Amabelle had learned her lesson well, for she had willingly, and with outward cheerfulness at least, sent her only child back to the compelling East, in the first devastation of her widowhood.

But when one day lengthened into two, and the days into a week, Amabelle had the feeling that something was hanging over her. She studied Roger's letters more for what they did not say than for what they said. They were brief, they were noncommittal. "He is holding something back," she said. Then following a brief telegram came one which was revealing. Roger begged his mother to ask the Miss Melsham whom he had mentioned more than once down to Zouche. She had done what he asked at once. It was elementary prudence to acquiesce, and when Roger arrived in person she had only said:

"I have asked this Miss Melsham, and as I didn't think she'd care to be the only girl in the party, I have wired for Victoria Cresswell."

Roger nodded, he made no reference to Victoria, but suddenly he crossed to his mother's side.

"Miss Melsham is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he said simply—he waited a few moments and then he added, "I hope you'll like her, Mother."

It was these few words, so bald, so restrained, yet so full of significance, that had been in Amabelle's mind ever since she heard them. None the less, she knew a little more about Naomi Melsham than these words revealed. All women can make judicious inquiries. Amabelle had put out feelers, and she had learned at least such outlines as that Naomi and her mother generally lived on the Continent, that they were not rich, and, a circumstance which weighed considerably with her, that the girl's father had been in the consular service in the East. She had spent the morning in a kind of feverish restlessness, and now, in the early afternoon, when Victoria was expected any

minute, and Naomi by a train only a very little later, she was so possessed with suspense, that it was impossible for her to sit still in the garden or in the house. Old wives say that when the birth of a man-child who will go far is imminent, the expectant mother walks from room to room, and that each peregrination foreshadows the upward incidents of her man-child's career.

Amabelle had been restless in just this way, and, after all, was it not a birth which was about to be accomplished? If what she feared—no, surmised; she did not allow herself to say feared—was correct, then was not something that had not been there before, coming into her life?

She paced up and down the big salon, looking at the familiar objects, with a spot in either cheek. Her husband seemed so near to her.

"If only you had been here to tell me what to do," she whispered.

She walked towards the window, listening for the first sound of a coming automobile, and, the better to hear, she drew aside one of the yellow silk curtains lightly worked with a flight of soft butterflies. As she stood there, the fold began to shake, until it seemed as if each butterfly was on the wing, yet, with that touch of humor which never deserted her, she said to herself, "Destiny comes in a Panhard nowadays, the chariot of Fate has lost its free wheel."

She had heard the car. It was coming up the drive—before she had time to get from the window to the fireplace it would have driven up to the entrance.

Yet the necessity to get to the fireplace presented itself as such an urgency that she almost ran across the room. She put out her hand, and grasped hard at the bow-shaped curve of the black marble mantelpiece.

She looked up at the window, placed above it French fashion, and her eyes stared through the glass, as if she must find help and strength on the other side of it.

Sir Arthur had copied this fireplace from a similar arrangement in the old château on the Loire. He had set

just that jubilant store by it that only a big man can afford to bestow on a small thing. He had so often drawn attention to it, that now Amabelle turned to it as the one thing which pre-eminently reminded her of him.

"The long view—that is the great thing," Sir Arthur had said to *terre à terre* neighbors who demurred about privacy.

Amabelle repeated his words now, and applied them to herself in quite another connection.

She must think of the long view, she reminded herself —of the ultimate gain, and not of the present dismay. She must school herself to fix her eyes on the future—on Roger's future—not her own.

The day had passed away from her—from her generation—it was with those coming on. "Le roi est mort—vive le roi," she summed up for herself.

She drew herself up. She was again herself, with that air of exquisite perfection that neither time nor sorrow had been able to dim.

She had caught the sound of steps. Littleport had thrown open the double doors. A guest was entering. Which guest?

Amabelle glanced down the long room, and then, with a sigh of relief, she hurried to meet the newcomer.

"You said you wanted me, and so I came at once," began Victoria Cresswell.

Amabelle nodded, and there was something in the way in which she drew up to this girl's side which seemed to intimate that here she knew she was close to a sympathetic personality.

Victoria looked at her hostess critically. She was about to say that Billy Hirst, the man to whom she had been engaged for years in a desultory fashion, had found himself unable to accompany her, but was assuredly going to join the party the following day, and then she said instead:

"Did you want me for anything very special?"

There were people who denied that Victoria Cresswell

had any claims to good looks, but most of them were ready enough to admit that hers was an unusually interesting face. Now, even in the midst of her perturbation, Lady de la Haye was conscious of an over-alert expression in the gray eyes.

"What is passing with Victoria?" she asked herself. The next moment she was inclined to take her own mind to task. "I am so overwrought," she murmured, "that I expect everyone else to be abnormal."

She motioned Victoria to one of the wide divans covered with a glorious stretch of Eastern embroidery, and taking the girl's hand she went straight to the point.

"My dear," she began, "the worst of being an independent woman is that one is always driven to depending on someone else when things go wrong."

"Has something gone wrong?" asked Victoria.

Amabelle considered a moment. She had sent for Victoria, and yet she did not know if she had the right to discuss Roger's affairs with her. She thought of the very little that had been said between her and her son, but if Roger revealed himself as freely to his friends as he had done to his mother, each member of the house party would have a suspicion of the trend of circumstances before he or she had been in his company five minutes.

Therefore, it seemed better, fairer, more loyal, to let the situation dawn on Victoria.

But if she could not mention Naomi, there were other developments she felt quite at liberty to reveal.

"You see," she began, with a wave of her hand towards the uncovered window over the mantelshelf.

"Have you opened the Chinese Room?" asked Victoria.

"For the first time since my husband's death."

"Then it is to be a diplomatic party?"

"Old Chi Lung is coming," Lady de la Haye went on.

"Your great China friend?"

"My husband's great friend," Amabelle added, "and Armand de Rochecorbon—you remember hearing of him?"

"He went out to Pekin to shoot with Roger?"

"Yes. I knew his mother in the old days. He is Aimée's cousin, you know."

Victoria nodded.

"It will be quite like old times."

"My dear," remonstrated Lady de la Haye, and her tone was reproachful—"that's just what it will not be, nothing ever does come over again precisely as it was."

"That's the skeleton at the feast for most of us," suggested Victoria reflectively.

"For most of us who are not as young as we once were. Regret is so middle-aged—that, and finding one's self supplanted," amended Lady de la Haye.

She had struck a note which compelled Victoria's attention. The girl looked up with a question on her face, but Amabelle would not meet her eyes.

"We are growing quite dreary," she evaded, with a jerky manner unusual to her. "And, I'm forgetting I have not told you about Miss Melsham yet. You know, my dear," Amabelle went on, "I want you with me so often that I can afford to tell you that in this instance you were especially asked to balance Miss Melsham."

"Who is she?" asked Victoria slowly. She was beginning to see that there had been not only a point, but a special point, in her sudden invitation.

"Miss Melsham is very beautiful, I hear."

"Then you have not seen her?"

"No," said Amabelle—"it's—it's Roger who is enthusiastic about her."

"You are asking her on Roger's account—is she an old acquaintance of Pekin?"

"Oh dear, no," said Lady de la Haye. "Roger met her at a ball since he came home. But," she went on bravely, "it seems that her father was in the consular service. He knew my husband when they were both young men. I don't fancy this girl is well off. You know what struggles official people have, with practically no private means."

"I know," said Victoria warmly, "how your heart goes out to anything connected with the old China days,—and,

if they are poor in addition, there's no help for it, you have to befriend them."

Amabelle laughed almost guiltily. In this instance did poverty weigh? Did antecedents weigh? Did anything but Roger's words—"Mother, I hope you will like her"?

But at any rate she had been loyal. She had established a sympathetic atmosphere for this golden-haired girl, though not without an inner reservation of which she had given not the faintest hint.

Victoria sat back, waiting and quiet. She was so little at ease herself, there was such a tangle in her private affairs, that, in her turn, she asked herself if she was imagining a knot here, and then, a high voice broke on the stillness, and a slip of a girl with her thin shoulder-blades working her long arms, danced in at the window.

"You, Aimée!" exclaimed Victoria, springing up to meet her.

The girl laughed joyously.

"Yes, I!" she cried out. "Look at me—I'm a betwixt and between. I've banished schoolbooks, and I haven't put up my hair yet. I have said good-by to Paris, my sainted nuns and the convent, and I'm not out yet. I'm a kind of making the best of both worlds. But," she ran on, "I'm coming down to dinner tonight. My first real party."

She paused for sheer lack of breath, and slipped down by Lady de la Haye's side, curling herself up in a kittenish fashion.

She put up her cheek against Lady de la Haye's sleeve. It was as soft and as ripe-colored as a peach that had caught all the warmth from an old wall.

Aimée was never known to be still for ten minutes at a time. Once Roger offered her a penny for every five minutes she kept in one position. She worked out one copper, and then declared that the bargain would be dear if it were a case of guineas: so now, she had hardly nestled up to Lady de la Haye's side, than she sprang up again.

"Do you know, I'm excitement all through me," she began, and she clapped one hand against her chest and the other against her back.

"Is there any special cause for effervescence?" Victoria asked tolerantly.

"I should think there is—ask Auntie."

Victoria looked from the girl to Lady de la Haye. Then she had not fancied, she had felt the tension in the air. But she said nothing. If Amabelle wished her to know things, she would tell her of them. Victoria was very observant, and observant people, if they are of the nice kind, make it a rule not to force a confidence. It's only the inept and the blundering who are forever a-crying, "Tell me! Tell me!"

Yet, just because she would rather have avoided it, Amabelle de la Haye played to the child's cue.

"Where is Roger? Have you seen him?" she asked.

"I saw him go to the stable yard quite half an hour ago," Aimée rattled out. "He was fidgeting about there, as if no one had ever taken a car out to the station before, and now," she added, with a toss of her head and a flash of her eyes, "you can both of you guess the rest."

"I don't know that I can," answered Amabelle, in a reluctant voice.

"Auntie," retorted Aimée, "don't be diplomatic and know nothing. You know, and I know, that Roger himself has gone to meet someone, and that someone is the delectable she."

"My dear," reproved Amabelle, "what a way to put it! Moreover, it's never wise to jump to conclusions."

Aimée sighed drolly. "I didn't jump at conclusions, they jumped at me," she protested. "Has Roger ever wanted you to ask a girl before? Not just suggested her, as he'd say, 'Oh, ask Victoria'; or 'Ask Aimée,' if I didn't live here: but kept on at it, in a 'get-to-the-Equator-by-the-North-Pole' fashion."

Victoria looked at her hostess. This, then, accounted for that something suppressed in her dear friend's manner.

Amabelle had the quality of exciting not only friendship, but warm partisanship. Victoria's first thought, notwithstanding the everlasting attraction of youth to love, was for Amabelle's suffering.

"Men are so inconsiderate to their womenkind when they are in love," she said to herself. "I hope Roger hasn't hurt her more than necessary."

And then, as she formulated this thought to herself, there was heard the swift rush of an upcoming motor.

"It's she!" cried out Aimée. "Roger's she!"

Victoria saw Lady de la Haye's face.

"Be quiet, Aimée," she exclaimed, "and come with me." She put her arm through the girl's, and pulled her out of the window, and then, with a very tender look on her face, she stepped back, and softly drew the silk curtains together.

Amabelle heard Victoria go. She knew exactly why the girl had withdrawn herself, and yet so critical did the moment seem to her, that she all but called her back again. With a quivering lip she suppressed the inclination. Some women (and a woman only knows how it hurts) are doomed to face the crisis of life alone. One hopes the guardian angel hovers very close to them, yet, if it does, one wonders why the mercy of hearing the flutter of the white wings is denied to them.

As Amabelle had done before, so she would do again—it took her but a moment to master her weakness. She walked into the middle of the room, she drew herself to her full height, she faced the doors. Her heart was beating until the throb of it hurt in her throat. She saw those doors open, she waited it seemed an appreciable time for someone to pass through, and then she caught her first glimpse of Naomi Melsham.

To the last day of her life Amabelle remembered the breathlessness of that moment. The girl entered with a kind of shy elation, Roger was following her and she knew it. He was drawn after her, not because her hair was golden, not because her eyes were blue, not because of

certain graces, certain charms, but for the reason that went the deepest down into the heart of humanity, because she was the complement to his manhood, and he knew it.

Roger had said a good deal about his mother, he had made it plain how much they had been to each other, and Naomi knew that when Roger took to himself a wife, his mother would cease to be the mistress at Zouche and become a guest; therefore the gravity of Lady de la Haye's greeting amazed her. One does not examine carefully unless one admits that there is a possibility of acceptance.

"Why should she give me a chance?" Naomi asked herself quickly.

She had heard of mothers who put the happiness of their children before their ambition and their purse. It occurred to her that she might be face to face with such a one. Insensibly she was softened, for she would always take the good and leave the bad when an unfettered choice was offered to her. She put out her hand with an appealing gesture. She asked mutely for a suspension of judgment, for, as she would have put it herself, "her chance," she waited for the introduction with a mist overspreading her blue eyes.

"Mother, this is Miss Melsham," began Roger in the triumphant male voice.

"My son has told me a great deal about you," said Amabelle. "I am very glad to see you."

"It was kind of you to ask me to come," murmured Naomi.

"And I am very glad you could accept the invitation," said Lady de la Haye.

Then the two women looked at each other. The trivial sentences had just been to gain time on either side. An examination, an appraisement was bound to follow—and they both knew that, for good or for evil, their first conclusion would color their relationship to each other as long as not they themselves, but Roger, walked on this earth.

CHAPTER IV

"If you please, my Lady."

It was Littleport who spoke, and the old servant's appearance, just within the double doors, broke in on a hesitation so momentous, that not only Naomi, but Lady de la Haye as well, gave a sigh—fluttering on the one hand, relieved on the other—at the postponement of what they both knew to be a great decision.

"Both motors *have* come back, Sir," said the old man, turning to Roger.

"Yes?" returned Roger apprehensively.

"Empty, Sir," went on Littleport, as he looked down with that fine 'I told you so' smile of the confidential servant.

"They must go to meet all the remaining trains," decided Lady de la Haye.

"That's what I told the men," Littleport answered. "I felt sure that his Excellency, being his Excellency, would have his old little ways."

Roger and his mother acquiesced, with no more than a simple assent.

It was Naomi who looked hard at the old man. Her first impulse had been to inquire as to the identity of this guest who was so important that two cars were kept running to look for him: the next moment, it was swept aside by another question.

The possessive note, the possessive air, were something new to her. Mrs. Melsham's series of *bonnes à tout-faire,* varied by an experiment who called herself *"dame à tout faire,"* received as small a wage as they would put up with, and gave a grudging service, sometimes pointed by pertinent observations, in return. Here was a servant who took wages, but both gave and received precisely that which no

wage could buy. Naomi looked eagerly at the clean-shaven face and the light, benevolent eyes. Littleport seemed to furnish the clue to the whole position at Zouche, and she saw that he was glancing at her, with quite as questioning a look as she gave him. So, she not only came into the horizon of Roger and his mother, but into that of Littleport too. As she thought that, the old servant permitted himself to smile, that delightful smile of a fond nurse for a child.

"Oh!" breathed Naomi, and if she had obeyed her impulse, she would have hurried up to the old man, and then from him to Lady de la Haye, since he had done so much to explain Roger's mother to her.

But it was not her place to advance. She must wait until she was called. She looked across with an appeal in her eyes.

Mrs. Melsham once remarked disagreeably, that Naomi was capable of asking for the mustard with as much entreaty in her expression, as if she were begging for a ten pound note. Mrs. Melsham had complained, not of the gesture, but about wasting it on anything so unproductive as table condiments.

Now, the plaintiveness carried over to Lady de la Haye and arrested her. Amabelle was eminently a just woman, and it requires some imagination to be that. It is the individuals who pride themselves on their level dispositions who perpetrate more cruelties than a Spanish inquisitor. Roger's mother did not quite realize what had touched the golden-haired girl, but she was sure of the appeal.

"I like her, I know I shall like her," Amabelle said in her heart; and even though the words were but framed interiorly, there was a break in them, so great were the issues involved in the decision.

In common with most people who have lived a life where the just estimate of a fellow-creature may make all the difference, Lady de la Haye was never content merely to think a thing, she must always act on her reflections.

She walked across to Naomi, she stood before her, and

since she was a few inches the taller she smiled down on her. Naomi raised her eyes, and again Roger's mother translated their expression into words. "The girl cares for Roger," she told herself. "But there is some doubt troubling her. Is it that she thinks I shall make things unpleasant for her?"

The peculiar temptation of one who loves much swept down on Amabelle de la Haye. Could she kill her son's new interest? Could she turn Roger from this girl? Not of course by opposition,—crude denial always breeds obstinacy,—but by more subtle methods. Naomi had shown that her armor of assurance, the assurance of youth and beauty with its man to worship, had its weak joints. Should she discover where that weakness lay, make sure if it were merely shyness, or if there were a cause for it, if, for example, there was a mother not quite up to the Zouche standard—Roger had been so evasive about Mrs. Melsham—and then play to undo the girl?

The train of thought flashed point after point into Amabelle's mind, it stayed there but time enough to take shape.

"I am a horrid, jealous old woman," she told herself. "Haven't I said in my heart that I like the girl?"

She felt that it lay with her to make amends; and then Roger, seeing perhaps the touch of hesitation, put in a word.

"Mother," he began, "you know I have talked interminably to Miss Melsham about you and Zouche."

"But," carried on Naomi, requiring no further prompting, "I had heard previously about the *chinoiserie* Sir Arthur collected," she bent down and touched a scent burner of green Canton enamel. "I was prepared for wonderful things," she added, "but not for such wonderful things as these. I am very ignorant about them; will you teach me something?"

Lady de la Haye just glanced at Roger—and humor predominated in her look.

"My son knows my weakness," she said; "he knows I like to show my husband's treasures."

"My mother is inexhaustible on the subject," Roger amplified.

"And so," commented Amabelle inwardly, "you think to use that as the key to opening my heart," but aloud she said, "Look at this," and she took a rabbit, carved out of a single piece of amethyst, off the mantelshelf. "It is the *clou* of the collection."

"Tell Miss Melsham its history," put in Roger boyishly.

"My husband bought it, soon after he first went out to the East," Lady de la Haye explained. "One New Year's Eve he watched a young mandarin hurrying from street to street, offering a jewel to every passer-by, for sale.

"The treasure was apparently so valuable that, though several of his countrymen spoke to this young man with evident sympathy, none of them could spare the money.

"Happily, my husband had caught something of the spirit of the East. He knew that it is a point of honor with a high-minded Chinese to pay every penny he owes before the New Year dawns, and he guessed that it must be a matter of vital importance which would make this young man, who was evidently of mandarin rank, peddle his family possessions in the street.

"Sir Arthur went up to him. He offered to buy the amethyst rabbit, and then he found that the young man was on the point of fainting from hunger and exhaustion.

"The poor fellow had literally starved himself, hoping to scrape together a sum which would buy off an extortionate official who was threatening to foreclose for debt, and to seize the ground on which the family tombs were built—and demolish them. The rabbit he had kept until the last extremity, for it was a family treasure, and the Celestials set great store on their artistic possessions.

"Sir Arthur then helped this young mandarin to lay his cause before a powerful protector at Court. The rapacious official was removed—and the family tombs saved."

"The family tombs?" echoed Naomi.

"Each nationality has that which it supremely reverences, and that which most nearly touches its honor," Lady

de la Haye explained. "It is a point of honor to a Chinaman to pay every penny he owes before the New Year dawns, but the possession of the family tombs goes down to the very fundamentals of his religion."

"Why?" asked the girl.

"Because," answered Lady de la Haye, "ancestor worship and the offerings at the tombs of those ancestors are the supreme acts of devotion in a Celestial's life. That," she added, "is one of the reasons why sons are of such importance that if a man has not one he will buy a boy and adopt him."

"And daughters?" asked Naomi.

Lady de la Haye shook her head.

"That is a point on which it will take the East a long time to meet the West," she said. "'Though a woman has given you seven sons; do not trust her,' that is one of their proverbs, and as I have just told you how important sons are, you can estimate how low, theoretically at least, is their conception of woman."

"Theoretically," put in Roger. "In practice there has been more than one Empress Dowager. But then," he added, turning to Naomi with a smile which somehow transformed the general assertion into an individual compliment, "no nation is consistent where your sex is concerned."

"How strange it all seems, how far away," Naomi murmured.

"When you see Chi Lung," said Roger quickly, "you will find that one Chinaman at least is very near to my mother and me."

"Chi Lung," repeated Naomi.

"His Excellency, the Marquis Chi Lung," explained Lady de la Haye. "It is he who is expected this afternoon."

"And never comes," said Naomi quickly, venturing on a touch of lightness for the first time.

"He would say himself that time was made for coolies,"

Roger answered, but his mother looked from one to the other of them gravely.

She was always jealous for the honor of the Chinaman who had been so firm a friend to her husband. She was always careful that not even the shadow of disrespect should be cast over him. An unthinking boy, new to the East, had once referred, in her presence, to the old man as Number One Heathen Chinee, but he never did it again.

"The young mandarin whom my husband befriended was Chi Lung," she said now.

"And that was how they became such friends?" Naomi asked. "I don't wonder," she went on, "but I thought Chinamen never really liked us Westerners."

It was just a moment before Amabelle answered. Chi Lung was so coiled into her family circle, that she always found the intimacy difficult to explain to the average stay-at-home European. Besides, the old man had a strictly Oriental view on certain matters, and Roger's absorption in this golden-haired girl was by no means likely to please him.

Amabelle was not a woman for nothing. When you can't climb a wall, go round the field until you find a gap, is a precept the sex has laid fully to heart—and perhaps the mere acceptance of it tells how much woman has had to endure.

Amabelle knew she had no hope of moving Chi Lung directly, but it was possible she might do it through Naomi herself.

She decided to do all she could to arouse the girl's interest in the old man—her reverence for him.

"Things in China mostly go the reverse way to things European," she went on. "It is the drops which make the ocean, we say. They say, 'All or not at all.' The magnitude of the repayment must match the magnitude of the service, or the debt of gratitude had better be left to the next generation to discharge. So, because we have

been prosperous, and always happy as far as worldly circumstances could make us, Roger, I, and my husband, while he lived—Chi Lung hasn't mentioned the tombs for years."

"But if things were to go wrong, he'd come to the rescue at once," Naomi thrust in quickly.

Involuntarily Lady de la Haye made a movement of withdrawal, though this was exactly the point she wished to make. She recovered herself in a moment.

"Forgive me," she said, "but, you see, if Chi Lung ever thinks the occasion big enough to intervene, then either Roger or I will be in very serious trouble."

Naomi nodded silently. She stood a moment thinking over this story. Viewed by the light of her mother's pursuit of the immediately advantageous, it seemed almost fantastically far away and potential, and yet she had a perception that it implied a morality far deeper than the glibly convenient code of present-day manners. She put the thought away in her mind, determined to go back to it when she was alone, but she smiled happily. The higher appealed to her, whereas up to now she had always been dragged back to the lower. The good or the bad of a nature is really implied by what, left to itself, it would take or it would reject. Circumstances so often atrophy the finest endeavor, and the world, blinking with short-sighted eyes, never seems to realize that a losing fight against big odds can be a finer thing than victory over an equal opponent. Unbiased, Naomi would always rather climb than descend.

"Tell me," she began again, wanting to improve this hour when Roger's mother would be her friend, "may I see the Chinese Room, I have heard so much about it? Wasn't it there that——"

She stopped, warned by a glance from Roger.

Amabelle saw not only the look, but the understanding it implied. She had been going to finish Naomi's sentence, and say that in this Chinese Room, so celebrated for its treasures, had been signed the first treaty by Chi Lung and

her husband wherein the East deigned to borrow of the West: but, instead, she answered the inner spirit, and substituted: "I was going to keep a surprise for you, Roger, until Chi Lung came."

"For me?" Roger answered.

His mother nodded. There was such a lump in her throat that for a moment she could not speak.

"I was going to tell you then," she said, as she mastered herself, "that the door of the Chinese Room is unlocked."

"Unlocked!" cried back Roger, yet even at that moment he drew in Naomi also.

"The room has never been used since my father died," he said to her.

"Don't you see that I have just pulled back the curtains?" Amabelle asked, and she indicated the little green blinds which, years ago, had been the subject of a bantering difference of opinion between her and her husband.

Sir Arthur always declared that his wife made little silken curtains for the window over the fireplace in obedience to the British spirit of compromise, since, really, she resented the lack of privacy that window implied; while she retorted that it was consideration for him. She knew he would write a better dispatch if he were saved from the possibility of inquisitive glances over his shoulder.

Roger hurried across, he put his arm round her.

"Mother," he said, "you always think of me before yourself."

She pushed him just a little away—and even yesterday she would have clung to him.

"Yes," she answered tremulously. "You are going to use the room now. When Chi Lung comes you must take him in there——"

She stopped abruptly in her turn. She had said more than she meant. She was alluding to certain specific circumstances connected with the old Chinaman's visit, which were concealed behind an ordinary week-end party at a country house. Naomi only took it to mean that if one

has a friend, one sometimes talks alone with him. As for Roger his thought was limited to the personal aspect.

Men, with many opportunities of the universal in action, so often stay by the domestic hearth in thought, while women, who in the flesh may never go twenty miles from home, roam the continents in their dreams.

Now, Roger's eyes were already looking over his mother's shoulder, and that mother knew it. The woman came before the career; the new interest, before her who had hitherto held his confidence and his love. Only those who loving supremely are called on to abdicate—and are expected to behave as if they would rejoice at being supplanted—can estimate the suffering of such a moment. It is so easy to say youth goes to youth; but does that make it any more pleasant for maturity left out in the cold? Amabelle turned to Naomi.

There are various qualities in generosity; some of it is so grudging that it almost ceases to be generosity and becomes a provocation.

There was nothing so ungracious about Amabelle. She had decided on her part, and she would play it with all the grace at her command.

"You must see the Chinese Room," she said. "My son must show it to you," and she went and opened the double doors before either of them could answer her.

Amabelle de la Haye stood there, pushing back the quaintly inlaid panels, for these doors and the other two into the salon from the hall were pairs, and the four of them represented the four seasons. Roger was still a moment, and Naomi dropped her head, her face veiled with a new soft shyness. To each of them it was so much more than a mere passage of time—a mere gesture; Amabelle realized that she had given all she had, and could never take back the gift. Roger was jubilant. He felt exalted, physically, as well as mentally; with Naomi, the first flush of happiness passed into retrospect, and the looking back was bitter.

Love may be Lord of the human heart, but Cupid is both

the judge and the taskmaster. This girl, who had been touched by pitch, rather than had touched it herself, who had sometimes succumbed to unworthy shifts, but the next moment had always drawn herself up in protest against them, would have given several years of her life, now, never to have known how her mother eked out a precarious income, or some of the people she eked it out among.

She looked away from Roger's eager face, from Lady de la Haye's expectant attitude, and in her heart she was registering the resolve to walk as Roger would have her tread, and then, as he had done once before that day, Littleport entered, and the old man's arrival brought back the situation to the small happenings of everyday life.

"Tea is on the terrace, my Lady," he said.

Lady de la Haye moved from the door.

"Thank you," she said, and she went to the window. She looked back at Roger, but he had gone over to Naomi.

"Never mind about tea, come and see the Chinese Room first," he said, eagerly, to her. "You must see it now. I haven't been in it myself for five years." He made a step along. "Come," he said, "just think of seeing it for the first time with you."

Roger hurried Naomi Melsham through the door. It swung back until it was all but closed, but the eager voices floated into the salon.

"What is that?" Amabelle heard her son's voice say. "Why, that is my father's desk. Look."

She knew he was bending down to show all the quaintness of an Eastern design adapted to European purposes. Perhaps he would explain to Naomi how the spring of what Sir Arthur called the confidential dispatch drawer worked.

It had been a whim of Sir Arthur to keep the secret of this drawer. Besides him, only Amabelle herself and Chi Lung knew that it existed.

She made a hasty step towards the Chinese Room. Her first idea was that Roger must not tell Naomi, then she checked herself.

A man's wife must not only walk by his side, she must share his life—and his career, unless the marriage is to be a failure.

With a sigh and a little lifting of her graceful shoulders Amabelle pushed aside the yellow silk blinds and went out on to the terrace.

CHAPTER V

Tea on the terrace at Zouche, if there were guests there, was one of those delightful breathing spaces when a number of pleasant people met together and felt that they had leisure to enjoy each other's society. But on this particular afternoon, as Lady de la Haye came through the window of the salon, she found no one there before her.

The terrace ran the whole length of the garden side of the house; it caught the afternoon sun aslant, so that there was always a shady corner as well as a warm one, and from either end two flights of steps led down, one on to the bowling-green, the other to a path which ended in an old gate-house (perhaps the marriage house of medieval days) looking on to the park.

The round table was pushed aside to avoid the glare. Littleport had seen to it that a hooded bench shut out the eye of the sun, an armchair, of what our fathers would have scoffed at as of the common Windsor variety, was drawn up before the tea tray. Lady de la Haye generally sat in it when she was on the terrace. She said it was a whim—and it was only those who knew her well who heard that it had been left to her by an old woman in the village.

Amabelle walked slowly up to the table. Somewhere in the garden she could hear Aimée laughing. She felt very much alone. She was possessed by that tired-in-every-limb feeling which so often follows a strain that apparently has been lived through triumphantly. But after a moment, impelled by the feeling that the daily round must go on, even if the skies threatened to fall, she took up the old tea caddy.

"One, two, three," she began counting the cups, and yet

laughing bitterly in her heart that she could be so earnest over anything so trivial, and then Littleport came to say that Mr. Marketel had just arrived.

"Mr. Marketel!" exclaimed Lady de la Haye.

"He drove up in his own car," the old man went on. "He asked if Sir Roger were here."

"He isn't in the list of guests," Amabelle put in quickly.

"Not as they were sent to the *Morning Post*," Littleport answered.

Amabelle half hesitated. She looked at the old man, and he met her glance with so careful a noncommittal air, that the pretty dimple which always showed at the corner of her mouth when she was very amused, puckered her lips with its coming and going.

"I see you have guessed," she said.

"Mr. Marketel said he was passing, my Lady," Littleport returned, with his shrewd smile. "He said he had stopped to ask if we could put him up over the week-end. Of course I didn't know he was invited, my Lady, seeing that you had said nothing about a room for him."

Amabelle laughed outright. She saw that Littleport was quite aware that Paul Marketel had come to meet Chi Lung,—but all she said was:

"I can trust to your discretion."

"Sir Arthur gave me his confidence for twenty years," Littleport told her proudly.

"I know," went on Amabelle, "and that is why I can speak freely to you now. This is a very important matter. It may be the turning-point in Sir Roger's career."

"I always do say he grows more like his father every day," Littleport put in, oblivious of the fact that there had been months, years even, when he had not seen him. "I'm glad Sir Roger is to have his chance, my Lady."

Amabelle smiled appreciatively. She recognized all the affection at the back of the old man's observation.

"We are forgetting Mr. Marketel!" she exclaimed. "Where is he?"

"I told Johnson to take him up to the second west

room," Littleport answered. "He said he was hot and dusty and wanted to change."

"The second west room," exclaimed Amabelle. "Why?"

Littleport answered with another of his fine smiles.

"His Excellency will have the first, and the dressing-room for his study. If Mr. Marketel is next-door, they may find it convenient to have a word here and there. Monsieur de Rochecorbon was to have had that room, but he can go one further down the corridor, though Diplomacy does go in to dinner before Finance."

Amabelle suppressed a smile of another kind this time. The old man's foible was etiquette.

"What I don't know about precedence Burke himself doesn't know," she had once heard him say as he tutored a raw footman.

"I meant to tell you later," Lady de la Haye went on, "that we should want you to help us."

Littleport bowed with his best air and waited.

"His Excellency and Mr. Marketel will meet in the Chinese Room," she said. "Sir Roger must join them unobserved—and secretly. You will order his little motor to come round, and then come and tell Sir Roger that it is at the door. He will get up, saying he has to go to Chipley Magna on business."

"Will he be driving himself?" Littleport asked.

"As far as the gate-house. He will leave the car there, come up the path, and go into the Chinese Room——"

"By the garden door at the side," finished Littleport.

"Just so," said Lady de la Haye.

"Then I'd better go and put the key in my pocket for him now," the old man remarked.

Amabelle lifted her hand. She was about to stop him—to say who was in the Chinese Room at that moment—and then a sudden shyness prevented her. Doubtless Littleport had already observed which way the stream was flowing. She watched the old man going to the open window, and her throat refused to make a sound, but suddenly he swerved and looked back at her.

"Mr. Marketel, I think, my Lady," he remarked.

He went along, and as he walked down the terrace Paul came on to it.

"I thought," Marketel began, advancing with his hand held out, "that I should find you here."

Amabelle turned to meet him, and it was possibly because he was in light flannels that it occurred to her that he had never looked so big. She said to herself, "He's like a colossus—he would override anybody or anything, if he thought it worth while." And then, with a touch of malice, she remarked aloud:

"It is delightful of you to chance in upon us in this way."

"I am come to throw myself on your kindness," he answered, in the same strain. The next moment he glanced quickly about him.

"Has Chi Lung come?" he demanded abruptly.

"Not yet."

"I thought he would have been here by now."

"He originally proposed himself for yesterday," Lady de la Haye answered, "then he put off his arrival until today, and even now he hasn't vouchsafed to tell us which train he is coming by, or if he means to come by road or by rail."

"Do you think that unpromising?" Paul asked, suddenly grave—anxious—for even to him, accustomed as he was to undertakings on a large scale, this loan from Britain for a Chinese navy was a very big thing.

"No," Amabelle assured him, "merely Celestial."

She waited a moment, and then looked up with that ingenuous manner which made her seem almost girlish.

"This is a great opportunity for Roger," she said softly.

"He deserves it," answered Paul. "He's done splendid work in the East. The Foreign Office think no end of him, that's why they have appointed him to watch these negotiations. It's the seal of his success. It has come young to him. I shouldn't wonder if he's a Plenipo. before he is forty, and has Paris before he retires. A great career."

"Yes," said Lady de la Haye, and then she added, "if nothing comes to spoil it," and the words slipped out as if someone else, not she herself, had said them.

Many men would have fenced. Paul faced the reservation squarely.

"Is something wrong?" he asked. "I fancied you looked troubled when I first saw you."

Amabelle held out both her hands.

"Help me, Paul," she besought.

"Help you," he returned, and there was a world of feeling in his tone. "Tell me exactly what is wrong."

"But I don't know that anything is," she answered, half laughing and half crying.

"Then," he retorted, "the trouble is connected with people, not things."

She nodded.

"But how did you guess it?"

"Things are expressed by facts," he answered, "and facts are definite—people are expressed by opinion, and there is nothing certain about opinion, excepting that it is mutable."

She looked at him and smiled wanly. There was something in her face which gave him a clue.

"Is it about Roger?" he asked.

"You have heard?" she blurted out.

"Nothing," he answered—"only, when a man's best friend is in Town and never at his club about one-thirty, one begins to wonder what woman he is taking out to lunch. Besides," he said, "I was at that dance."

"At the Tippley-Smiths?"

"Yes."

"They have moved into Grosvenor Gardens since I gave up going out."

Paul took a turn down the terrace.

"An unsuitable wife has been the grave of more than one diplomatic career," he said fiercely.

Amabelle followed him quickly.

"Don't," she cried out. "I'm giving you a wrong impression. Miss Melsham is here now. She is with Roger in there."

"In the Chinese Room?" Paul asked.

"Yes."

He gave a subdued breath through his teeth.

"I like her, Paul, I like her," Amabelle went on, "I know I do——"

"Well then?" he asked.

"It's the unexpectedness of it," she said. "It put me into a panic for fear she might not be quite—quite——"

She looked down and blushed hotly.

"When I heard she was coming," she confessed, "I did a mean thing—I sent for Victoria Cresswell."

The announcement had an effect that Lady de la Haye by no means anticipated.

"Victoria," echoed Paul, and he flung round with an abrupt movement. Amabelle caught a glimpse of his face, of its sudden lightening, and then its lowered brows.

"What is it?" she exclaimed.

"Tell me why you sent for Victoria," he asked curtly.

"You see," Roger's mother admitted tremulously, "I was afraid this girl might be one of those garish young women one does see going round Europe. The most fastidious men are the most unaccountably taken in at times. My experience of the Continental mothers and daughters led me to dread anything of the kind for Roger. Victoria represented the standard he had been used to. There is nothing more illuminating than contrast. If that contrast were to tell against—against——"

"I see," put in Paul.

"It was better he should observe it now than later."

"And how did the beautiful lady stand the test?" asked Paul, half amused, half dismayed at so feminine a manœuver.

Amabelle drew herself up, both dignified and loyal, if not exactly consistent.

"If you have seen Miss Melsham," she said, "you

must know that no one could take the smallest exception to her."

"What is it, then?" said Paul, still probing to get to the root of the trouble.

"Roger is so reticent about the mother," Amabelle returned. "I can't help thinking she must be rather foolish —or undignified."

"Isn't that better than being interfering?" said Paul lightly, but speaking out of a certain personal experience.

Amabelle began on a laugh, but it ended in a break.

"I have lost my bearings," she said piteously. "I feel as if all my old landmarks had gone. That's the worst of being an independent woman by nature. I always want to lean on a strong man when I find one."

But her weakness was over in a moment.

"The wise submit with a smile, even if it is a little awry," she summed up, "the foolish become mothers-in-law."

She rose as she said that, and looked at the tea table.

"Make tea, Paul," she said, with one of those confessions of femininity that she could make so delightful. "I've been so near to weeping that I'm sure my eyes are red. I'm going to powder my nose—and I'll tell you a secret. A woman's heart may be chipped, but it isn't absolutely broken as long as she can give a thought to her complexion."

Paul just laughed, and pulled aside the curtain into the salon for her, but he looked after her gravely.

"She's a brave woman," he told himself, as he took up the tea caddy. He made sure that the kettle was boiling, with that nice attention to detail a bachelor man does display in domestic matters, and then his quick ear caught the sound of voices talking together in the salon.

"Roger and——" he said to himself, and he smiled grimly.

The silence fell again. Roger and Naomi Melsham must both have gone into the hall.

Paul felt sure it was Naomi. He went on with the tea-

making. The meal was delightfully informal at Zouche, and so, for the benefit of any late comers, the tea was always made in one of the two big teapots, and then poured off into the other. Paul went on with what he called the decanting business, and when that was finished he took out a cigarette.

He glanced over the terrace, on to the bowling-green, he changed his position that he might look down the walk, and varied it yet again to watch for anyone coming through the door of the walled garden. Victoria was somewhere near. He checked the impulse to go and look for her. "She must know it is tea time," he told himself.

He took out his watch, glanced at it, and shut its case with an impatient snap, and then he heard the door from the hall on to the terrace, the one he had used himself, open.

Paul Marketel knew that someone feminine was coming towards him, but even before he looked he didn't make the mistake of thinking it was Victoria. Once at least in a lifetime, most men differentiate, where one woman is concerned, to the nicest degree.

He faced round, and before the figure in soft pink, with the touch of green round the slim waist, was halfway up the terrace he knew who it was.

He took a couple of quick strides forward and held out his hand.

"You must be Miss Melsham," he began.

"And I see you are Mr. Marketel," Naomi answered.

"That is nice of you to remember me," he went on heartily.

Naomi smiled at him with a kind of timid friendliness, as if feeling her way.

"I didn't know you were coming," she went on, "but then, of course, excepting the great Chinaman—I have just heard all about him and I do so want to see him—I don't know who is coming."

"I'm the unexpected pleasure," Paul answered, "or the bad penny always turning up."

"The former, of course," said Naomi. "A noted financier must not suggest anything commercially unsound."

She smiled appealingly at the big man as she made her little point. She wanted a favorable verdict, not for any ulterior reason, but just because Paul Marketel was Roger de la Haye's best friend. A woman always takes a definite line towards a man's friends from the very first moment that she admits her own interest in him. She either seeks to draw them nearer to her, or plays to antagonize them. The one is the outcome of a large outlook, the other of a narrow jealousy. Nine times out of ten they meet with their appropriate reward. The tenth, the man pays—and curses himself for a poor thing.

"Did you expect to find Lady de la Haye here?" Paul began. "She will be back in a moment."

Naomi nodded. In reality she had been shy about coming to meet Lady de la Haye with Roger behind her. So she made an excuse. The sun was hot. She would put on a garden hat.

She had seen Littleport stop Roger as she went up the stairs, and she had stolen down so cautiously, her cheeks a little the pinker for the precaution, just that she might get to Lady de la Haye alone.

She and Paul moved back to the tea table, but when he offered her a seat she shook her head.

"I want to look about me," she said, and her eagerness was almost childish. "I want to see everything."

Paul pointed out the gate-house, and told her its supposed history; he showed her the high wall of old red brick, inclosing a wonderful rose garden, he drew her attention to the sundial, set up on the ledge of the bowling-green, and told her how Sir Arthur had brought it from Pekin.

"The Chinese," he said, "began to use astronomical instruments before the Europeans got farther than realizing that there was a sun and a moon. This dial is a copy of a primitive one which stood for ages on the great wall. The Germans carried off the original after the Boxer Riots."

"How interesting," Naomi murmured. She raised her

blue eyes. "I'm lost in admiration wherever I go," she said softly, "and yet there is nothing of the show place about Zouche. Tell me! how does it manage to be so wonderful and yet so homelike?"

"Isn't that the effect of individual temperament?" Paul rejoined. "I mean," he went on, feeling that it would be well to make this point very clear, "that Lady de la Haye would radiate happiness, and therefore warmth, wherever she went."

"Sir Roger evidently thinks there is no one like his mother," Naomi answered quickly.

"Do you wonder at that?" asked Paul. "I never knew my mother," he went on gravely. "I always feel that I have missed one of the greatest things in life."

There was no answering consent in Naomi's mind. Her mother represented a drawback, not an advantage. She looked up and met Paul Marketel's glance. It was so grave, yet so kindly, that it was possible she might have blurted out a part of the truth, if not the whole truth, and thereby altered the whole course of her life's history,—people so often did confide in Paul Marketel. But at that moment Roger came hurriedly on to the terrace.

"I thought I was never going to get away," he began. "Littleport got hold of me—he's full of arrangements." He pulled up. "You here, Paul," he said. "That's splendid."

"Come to throw myself on your mercy," Marketel answered.

Roger nodded. He didn't want to enlarge on the deception before Naomi. He looked ahead. "Why!" he exclaimed, "where is my mother?"

Amabelle might have heard the impatient voice, for at that very moment she came through the window of the salon.

"Ah!" she said lightly, "you here." She turned to the girl. "Have you seen all the treasures?" she asked.

"I think," began Naomi eagerly, "that the Chinese Room

is the most beautiful room I have ever seen. Even I should write good letters at that wonderful old desk."

"Mother," said Roger, "do you know the spring of the secret drawer failed to act? I opened the drawer, and then shut it in the usual way, but the spring hadn't caught. It would open again before I turned the key in the lock."

"It did that once before," Lady de la Haye answered.

"In my father's time?"

"Yes," said Amabelle.

"And how did he get it put right?" Roger asked.

"There's a master spring at the back—I'll show it to you," Amabelle said. She waited a moment.

"It seems foolish," she went on, "but don't mention this to Chi Lung. Chinamen go by omens more than one would think——"

"And the last time the drawer didn't catch——" put in Roger.

"The negotiations fell through."

"Then," announced Paul, "we must certainly none of us mention it now."

A glance from Lady de la Haye stopped him. She began to make the tea. She was just wondering aloud whether Aimée could have taken Victoria to the Rectory—did she see Paul Marketel's face suddenly go blank?—and then the girl herself ran up the steps from the bowling-green.

"Ursa Major," began Aimée, as Paul went along to meet her. She put her arm in his. "Victoria is coming presently," she remarked. "She suddenly turned tail and said——"

"What?" asked Paul sharply.

He was never answered. He and Aimée had reached the round table, Roger had risen.

"Aimée, I don't think you have met Miss Melsham," he began, and his tone was almost severe. It seemed to him odd at least—if not well on the way to being wrong—that anyone should claim attention before Naomi had been duly honored.

"I have always lived at Zouche," began Aimée, as she offered her hand. "Auntie says I might as well be her own daughter. Don't you, dear?" appealing to Lady de la Haye.

"You will always be my child to me," she said.

She understood. Aimée was being visited by a tinge of jealousy. Naomi heard the intonation too. She might not quite grasp the cause, but she was sure of the antagonism. It was the first warning of disapproval.

She moved her chair, so that Aimée must take the one by her. She looked down, and was just wondering which was the nearest road to the girl's heart, when a cynical comment of her mother's came into her mind.

"Never neglect the flapper," Mrs. Melsham once observed. "One day she may be a duchess."

Naomi returned hastily to her tea—silenced. Even from afar, Mrs. Melsham had the power to spoil things, to suggest sordid views and interested motives.

Yet, even as she made the bitter comment, this new softening that was wrapping itself, like a beautiful veil, around her mind, stopped her.

Here at least she would banish such thoughts.

She looked over to the heads of a row of poplars visible above the garden wall, as if their very uprightness and beauty were a protection. She bid herself take heed of the summer day, of the warmth and the light, as if telling herself that dark thoughts were an incongruity not to be admitted in such an environment; and so it fell out that she, alone, was looking straight down the terrace. She gave a start, uttered an exclamation of surprise.

A little old man appeared at the head of the steps, he pattered along with shuffling feet, as if he habitually wore loose soft boots, and then, when he saw the group by the tea table, he pulled up, as if it were for those there before him to come to him, and for him to wait to receive them.

Naomi but glanced at the quaint figure, at a curious mingling of the East and the West in the costume—and she knew before Roger whispered the name to her that it must be the little great man of China.

Lady de la Haye rose instantly.

"Your Excellency," she began as she hurried towards him. "You have walked, and we sent two cars to meet you."

The old man stood before her smiling blandly. There was something of the impish child in his expression. Chi Lung, the greatest power of his day in the East, the far-seeing diplomat, who linked his country to the West, with a foresight that may yet turn out to be one of the great features of the world's progress, wore exactly the smile of a clever child who knows that it has done something tiresome, but who is sure of commendation rather than of blame, because it has been tiresome in such an original manner.

"I bore myself on the vehicles of nature," the old man began, as he patted Lady de la Haye's hand. "The green and the refreshing shade remind me of the lotus and the bamboo of my own poor dwelling in the Ever Blessed Middle Kingdom."

Lady de la Haye laughed indulgently, but not quite easily, for she was not unmindful of the indications. The Marquis Chi Lung had various sides to his nature, and a manner appropriate to each one. When it pleased him he could turn himself into a very fair imitation of a European; when it pleased him he could be as Celestial as the most stay-at-home mandarin, and there were occasions when, of set purpose, he could be unpardonably rude. Just now, when she wished, for a particular reason, that he should view the situation from a Western standpoint, his freakish arrival pointed exactly the opposite way.

She glanced apprehensively at him. The long, oval face was impassive to stolidity, the oblique eyes blinked as if the mere act of vision irked them—Chi Lung seemed mostly occupied in stroking his beard.

"Why doesn't Roger come at once?" Amabelle asked herself. Roger knew all about Chinese standards. He knew exactly what Chi Lung would deem his due, and what the old man would resentfully consider less than his due, and

there was he, pausing but a moment it is true, yet still pausing, to turn the hooded bench, since the sun came straight into Naomi Melsham's face.

"Roger!" she called. "Roger!"

He came on the very sound of her voice, but Amabelle had no hope that the incident had escaped his Excellency, or that the old man, with his jealous affection, would fail to resent being kept waiting, even for a moment, for a woman, and, worse still, for a young and pretty one.

If Chi Lung did consider himself slighted, there was nothing to show it. He put one of his yellowed old hands, with every bony articulation showing through the skin, on either of Roger's shoulders.

"Behold!" his Excellency began, "the pear is off the same tree."

He looked long at the young clean-shaven face. "The look is the same as his father's, but the expression is different," he went on, noting a certain shy oversensitiveness in the young man's eyes. "It is as if both the gadfly and the housefly had power to sting him. My son," he continued, "it is written in our wisdom that the man who sees all white is as deceived as he who sees all yellow. The one gone to rest made few mistakes—he knew that gray was but white dust mixed with a handful of black mud, and orange but yellow clay mixed with a little red earth."

Roger laughed—but constrainedly. For one thing, he wondered how so florid a greeting would strike Naomi Melsham; for another, the old Chinaman had put his finger on a weak spot. Sir Arthur de la Haye possessed a mind of almost perfect balance. Amabelle's was so innately a sunny nature that it took a great deal to disturb her. By some odd turn of heredity Roger's disposition was inclined to oversensitiveness. It was only his frank acceptance of the fact which saved him from a meticulous conscience.

Then abruptly his Excellency pushed Roger away and pointed to Naomi.

"Behold, the hornet leaves the pumpkin aside and fastens on the golden plum," he exclaimed, and his tone was abrupt —fierce, even.

Lady de la Haye had no word for the sudden outburst. Her worst fears had been realized. Chi Lung had observed Roger's interest in this golden-haired girl, and evidently resented it.

It was Paul Marketel who saved the situation.

"You remember me, your Excellency?" he interposed quickly.

The Celestial put both his hands into his sleeves, and hunched his body over them.

"Behold!" he exclaimed, "it is the man of so much money that he lends of his superfluity to Princes and Powers. But money comes not of itself—it must be gathered—will he want to take from this inconsiderable one even the little that he has?"

He looked from face to face and laughed slyly at his own witticism.

"Your Excellency," put in Amabelle anxiously, for evidently her old friend was in a perverse mood, "you recall Monsieur de Villeseptier. He was with us in the days gone by at Pekin. He was as a right hand to my husband, and you yourself accorded him the gift of friendship."

The old man nodded.

"He went to walk in the Eternal Shades before his time," he said gravely.

"He and his wife too," answered Lady de la Haye. She repressed a shudder. It was nearly eighteen years ago, and yet she could not think of that awful time when an outbreak of plague, laying low its thousands, robbed her of her two best friends in less than twelve hours.

"I have written him in the tablets of my memory," Chi Lung answered, and characteristically while he remembered the man he ignored the lovely girl, his wife.

"This is his child," Amabelle went on, drawing up Aimée. "She has lived with me ever since. She was called Ama-

belle after me, but we always call her Aimée. She is as dear as my own daughter to me."

"So," remarked his Excellency. "How old are you?" he asked, turning to Aimée, for he bestowed a certain amount of interest on her, seeing she was, as he would have put it, part of Roger's house.

"Seventeen," answered the girl, in quite a meek little voice.

His Excellency took out his snuff bottle, and carefully poured a little of the brown powder into his hand. Amabelle quailed inwardly. Her old friend was indeed minded to be aggressively Oriental this afternoon. She had not seen him take snuff in public since he put an insolent German in his place, quite ten years ago.

"It is time the rings were in her ears. You should buy a husband for her," he went on, after he had scooped the snuff into his nostrils with the tiny spoon attached to the stopper of his bottle—and he nodded towards Aimée. "She will make a useful help to Roger. Offer her to one that has the ear of the Yamen, but arrange quickly; the sweeter the perfume the uglier the flies which gather round the bottle."

There might have been an embarrassed pause after that candid appraisement, but Aimée broke in on it.

"Aunt Amabelle has told me," she said, "how your Excellency helped her that time when I was a tiny baby, and people were afraid of going into my father's because of the infection. I often think of it—and all you did for my father too."

Artlessly she had struck the right note.

"Gratitude is the lotus flower of the spirit," Chi Lung observed. "I will send you a roll of silk, Mademoiselle."

"For me!" Aimée exclaimed. She knew no greater compliment could have been paid her. "Oh, thank you," she ran on, "but I knew you were nice before you said that."

"I will send you two rolls of silk," Chi Lung announced. "You have inculcated the seven virtues, I see," he said, turning to Lady de la Haye. "That is well! The woman greeted with favor who refrains from importunity is as rare

as twin pearls in one oyster shell. None the less," added his Excellency, dry again in a flash, "when a woman's lips say it is enough she looks at you with her eyes and they say again," then he put out his hand, and caught Lady de la Haye by her sleeve.

"There is a jay chattering to the Hope of the House," he said.

"That is Miss Melsham," was all Amabelle could say.

"I was waiting until your Excellency had finished talking to Aimée," put in Roger. He passed the matter over to his mother with a wave of his hand.

"His Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung, Miss Melsham," Amabelle said.

The girl came smilingly forward. She had watched the old man with Aimée. She had come to the conclusion that under a somewhat redoubtable exterior, the Celestial had a very human heart. But there was nothing benevolent in the look bestowed on her. Naomi felt she must not fail where a schoolgirl had succeeded.

"Your Excellency," she began, "I have heard so much about you."

"Who has gossiped about old Chi Lung to a woman?" the old man demanded.

"Sir Roger," Naomi answered.

"So!" remarked his Excellency. "The son of my old friend makes stories for the house at the expense of this poor one."

"No! no!" expostulated Naomi—feeling that the interview was going all wrong. "He was only saying nice things."

"Nice?" asked the Celestial.

"He was telling me about the tombs of your ancestors."

"And what of my poor belongings?" the old man asked.

"That you cared so much for them."

"Cared," repeated his Excellency. "What is that?"

"Well," stammered the girl, "it—it is so wonderful——"

She began to flounder in her embarrassment.

Chi Lung watched her malevolently. Roger made a step

between them, and Amabelle felt so sure that she must intervene that she came out with the first thing she remembered.

"Another friend, but of Roger's days at Pekin, this time, is coming," she said hurriedly. "Monsieur de Rochecorbon. Do you remember him?"

"Armand," exclaimed Marketel. "What's his latest craze this time? Last time I saw him——"

He was stopped by Naomi Melsham, her voice was so urgent.

"Who . . . who did you say?" she asked.

"Armand de Rochecorbon," Paul answered.

"My cousin," put in Aimée.

Naomi let her hands fall to her side with a helpless gesture—she stepped back, out of the circle, out of the sunlight.

"Do you know Monsieur de Rochecorbon?" Amabelle asked her.

The girl seemed to consider a moment. It flashed into Amabelle's mind that this might be a case of expediency, not of truth. The next instant a frank statement seemed to reprove her.

"We have met so many people," Naomi explained, "that it is difficult to say. Mama wanders so, that I can never be quite sure about anyone. We did meet a Monsieur de Rochecorbon—but that was years ago at Nice"—she raised her eyes and looked hard at Roger—"that was the year I went to live with mama," she told him. "The very first year," she insisted.

CHAPTER VI

"Your Excellency," began Paul Marketel, about ten minutes later—that is as soon as he could disturb the party round the tea table and draw the old Chinaman aside—"we are to meet in the Chinese Room; I will join you there in half an hour."

"The sun is hot without," Chi Lung demurred, "but the blinds are drawn, and there is shade within the four walls of the house."

Paul shook his head.

"In half an hour, your Excellency," he maintained, and he had two reasons for his firmness. One was, the consideration that when you have something to sell it is never wise to appear too eager to meet the buyer, how much less if that buyer be an Oriental. The other, that he had a pressing personal affair to dispose of.

Victoria Cresswell had not appeared. It was possible that she was purposely going without tea to avoid him, and that seemed to him so intolerable that he determined to go in search of her.

"I want to find Miss Cresswell," he said to Lady de la Haye. "I must see her before I begin my letters." He paused and smiled dubiously. "It's about some business," he went on, with the awkwardness of an honest man telling but a part of the truth. "I have prevailed on Miss Cresswell to let me go into her affairs. Her investments were —er—unsuitable. She saw that herself as soon as I pointed it out. She has quite a gift for finance."

He turned away without waiting for a reply. People who have to fight for their own hand—and do it successfully—can usually dispense with the stimulus of approval. Perhaps, however, even he might have paused, had he caught

the look on Lady de la Haye's face. She was dismayed, but enlightened. Here was the clue to the something strange in Victoria, to the something unusual in Paul himself.

"Do you think I have forgotten when I began to find diplomacy interesting?" Amabelle murmured to herself. "Don't you understand," her mind ran on, with the pity of the perspicacious feminine for the masculine bat, "that there is no subject, from rag-picking to the differential calculus, a woman won't find absorbing, if the right man only explains it to her in the right way?"

She looked after the powerful frame going down towards the rose garden.

"Has he forgotten that Victoria has been engaged to Billy Hirst since she was eighteen?" she protested inwardly.

Perhaps her unspoken dismay communicated itself to Paul. He paused, with his hand on the latch of the old wooden door. For one moment he put this straight question to himself, "Have I the right to supplant?" No honest man can step into another man's shoes and not be visited by doubts. But, having weighed them, may it not be a finer virtue to go on than to go back?—for, recollect, such a decision affects two lives, not one;—only one must be very sure where the virtue comes in, and where the vice.

Paul rattled the handle of the door impatiently—and turned it.

He was right. Victoria was there. There was a fountain in the midst of the square, with four grass paths converging on it, and roses everywhere. He walked up to her, and as he approached, Victoria's face, which never had very much color in it, went a shade whiter. Her hands began to work nervously. She plucked a flower, and began to pull it to pieces.

Victoria was in that odd stage in feminine development when the more one longs for a thing the greater the precautions to turn from it.

Besides, she was, in a way, very like a boat without a rudder. Until she saw Paul, Victoria had lived singularly

aloof from men. Some girls are women before they leave off being children. Now and then a woman is totally uninfluenced by the masculine element until she meets the man who, whether it ever comes to fulfilment or not, is essentially her man. Everything about her had conspired to retard Victoria's development, just as everything had conspired to force Naomi Melsham's. Victoria's youth was passed in a remote village with a certain Aunt Martha, and this Aunt Martha had a talent for doing harm in the cause of righteousness. The old lady held that the rising generation stood in need of perpetual suppression, and that originality was rather more heinous than sin. It said much for the firmness of Victoria's fiber that she had any initiative left. As it was, no sooner was she released from Aunt Martha's tyranny than her whole being expanded with a bound. Aunt Martha, who had never allowed Victoria the smallest insight into her affairs, never troubled about the inconsistency of leaving, what the obituary notice called " the unsettled property," to Victoria absolutely. The girl was as bewildered as she was ignorant, and naturally she put her faith in the man who made Aunt Martha's will—Edward Buzby. He managed Billy Hirst's affairs too—and Victoria was engaged to Billy. That was another of Aunt Martha's arrangements, and, unfortunately, when the pious woman arranges the affairs of others in the way that is best for them—(or so it pleases her to think)—the harm she does has a way of persisting.

The landed estate devolved on Billy, so the old lady, who always quoted that money was the root of evil, juggled with two lives to keep the property together.

As for Victoria, while Aunt Martha lived, Billy was for her the only soul who pulled up, for even half an inch, the blind of the window looking on to the world.

Essentially, Billy Hirst was a very fine gentleman—Aunt Martha treated him shamelessly—and no one ever knew of his dismay when he realized that he was caught. He played his part so well that, even when Victoria came to see that Billy was grateful each time she relegated the wedding day

to a future occasion—she never realized that he would have been more grateful still, had she given him back the engagement ring.

Then, with Aunt Martha's death, came Victoria's emancipation, her eager look out on to the world—and Paul Marketel.

Paul came right up to her with a grim smile. Neither of them uttered a word of conventional greeting, but not a single symptom of her distress escaped him. It hurt him and yet it hardened him.

"I want my answer," he began. "I must have it. I never wanted anyone until——"

Just because Victoria knew how the abrupt, unadorned sentence would end, just because there was nothing she wanted more to hear, she interrupted hastily.

"Please, Paul. You—you have arrived so unexpectedly——"

She looked down. She clasped her hands nervously together, and that showed the ring, still on her third finger. Paul muttered a hard word.

"Look here," he began, "we can't go on like this. I'm not so young as I was, and at my age, when one gets things for the first time, one gets 'em badly. Have you told Billy?"

Victoria rose. She lifted her head and looked the big man in the face. It was these moments of swift resolution that particularly appealed to Paul.

"I have not told Billy," she answered. "I cannot tell him."

"But you promised."

"I know," Victoria answered—"but you must release me from that promise."

"Release you! Why?"

"Billy is in trouble."

"In trouble," reiterated Marketel.

"In serious trouble," Victoria answered.

Paul motioned her authoritively to the seat. "Sit down," he said quietly, "and tell me exactly what has happened."

"You know Edward Buzby did Billy's business as well as mine," Victoria began.

"A pretentious fool," Marketel interpolated.

"Aunt Martha liked him," Victoria murmured.

"She would," Paul answered, and he laughed shortly. Then they were both suddenly silent. Without visible approach, they had never been closer, and the proximity made both of them breathless.

It was Victoria who recovered first.

"But for you," she said, looking steadily before her, "I should be where Billy is now."

And then, since she was not one of those irritating people who hover round an announcement, she went on—"Edward Buzby disappeared last Wednesday. He left his affairs in hopeless confusion. Billy is quite poor now, he's coming here this afternoon, just for a last fling, as he calls it. After that, he'll have to do something. He hasn't as many hundreds left as he had thousands."

Paul was silent for quite a long time. He looked up at a fussy little cloud racing over an expanse of blue. Apparently, his whole interest was taken up with its rate of progress, but in reality he was reflecting on the tricks and quips of Fate. Edward Buzby had impressed him so unfavorably the one time he had had an interview with him, that he had once thought of giving Billy a hint, but the "not-my-business" frame of mind prevailed—and now, the question of Buzby's honesty—or dishonesty—had coiled itself around the very framework of his own life.

The next moment, he left the question of correlative causes and came back to the practical aspect.

"I'm sorry for Billy," he said, "but how does his loss affect you and me?"

"Can't you see?" Victoria returned. "This has made all the difference. Billy is poor now."

"It is a question of affection, not of finance," muttered Paul.

"I know," the girl answered, "but look at it for your-

self. You ask me to break off my engagement, to go and tell Billy that—that——"

"I love you, and he doesn't, and that you don't love him——"

"I can't—I can't," the girl faltered.

"Billy does not want you; I do," Paul protested.

Victoria stood with her head cast down, but, as Paul knew all too well, unconvinced.

He walked to the edge of the stone basin, and stood with his hands in his pockets, his lower lip thrust out. He watched the drops from the fountain pattering on to a lily leaf, and as he watched, he debated. The very masterfulness of his own will handicapped him. He knew that he could rush Victoria, carry her off her feet perhaps, and force the conclusion he desired, before she had time to help herself. But there was afterwards—all the long years of afterwards.

Women weigh, as inevitably as men pursue. That's why it is unwise to treat them to evasions. They may look as if they accept them, but they are marked down, and recorded for ever against the offender.

It was some perception of this, or perhaps his own initial honesty, which made Paul fall back on bald statement again.

"I want you, my dear," he said. "That's all I can think of. I wanted you the first moment I saw you. Every hour before I get you is an hour wasted. You have come into my life, and you will stop there. I'll make you happy, if anything I can do will bring happiness——"

He broke off, threw out one of his great arms—"Lord!—Victoria," he said, "and you think I'm going to stand aside for a man who might have married you any time these last eight years, and hasn't?"

He laughed shortly.

The color came up on to Victoria Cresswell's face. The uncompromising statement hurt her, and hurt her all the more for being true.

No woman, even if she isn't in love with a man, can hear with equanimity that she is a negligible quantity to him.

With many a one, it would have served as a justification for taking the more enticing way, but Victoria shook her head.

"No, Paul," she said, "don't put it that way. Billy may be a casual soul, but that doesn't affect either you or me—I mean it doesn't affect what I should do."

She began to smile, and came a little nearer to him. "Let matters stay where they are," she entreated. "I shall go away. I shall not see you again until——"

"Until when?" thrust in Paul.

"Until Billy has got something to do," the girl answered. "Wait until he is busy, and happy in his own way. You know how his wanderings absorb him. When his mind is occupied—and his life is full of interest—then I can ask him to release me."

Paul smiled very grimly.

"Then my happiness," he remarked, "is contingent on Billy finding a congenial job?"

Victoria was not daunted. A big man hardly terrifies a woman—a little one sometimes does.

"How good you are," she murmured, with a typically feminine taking and leaving. "It's just like you to understand. We'll settle it so. Things go on as they are, and I'll go away. I can't leave Zouche tonight, everyone would wonder why I had broken up the party. But when I can get away, I'll travel. It's time I did. Why!" she said, "I have never seen Switzerland and all those places everyone has been to."

She turned from the fountain, and went along the grass path towards the garden door. "And now," she said, with that sweet decision of a woman who means to get her own way, "I think I'll stay here for a little."

"Which means you want me to go," Paul said quizzically.

The girl looked at him.

"All right," the big man answered. "I have letters to write. You have won this time, but recollect, it will be my turn next."

Paul Marketel pushed open the door. He walked down

the bowling-green and mounted the steps on to the terrace—(it was his quickest way to the Chinese Room), but, once there, he pulled up abruptly.

Lady de la Haye was still sitting by the tea table, though Roger and Naomi Melsham had disappeared, but with her was someone new. A single glance showed Paul that it was Billy Hirst, or rather, to give him his due title, the Honorable William Hirst.

As Paul approached, Billy's laugh rang out, and anything less like a man ruined suddenly can hardly be imagined.

Billy was one thing dominantly—and that thing was, an adventurer—in the Elizabethan sense of the word. A fighter, an explorer, a gentleman, he was born out of due time.

His skin was bronzed a permanent brown by many varieties of temperature, an overflowing eagerness quivered in every muscle. He was never really happy until he was hot and dirty, or cold and dirty, in one of the more inaccessible quarters of the globe.

"How did you get here?" asked Paul, as Billy sprang up with the information that it was ripping to see him.

"Motor-bike!" Billy explained—he laughed whimsically. "That's economy, you know," he ran on, "I shall have to sell my motor. The only wonder is it's left to me to sell. Oh!" he broke off, "but of course you don't know. I've just been telling Cousin Amabelle."

"Yes," said Lady de la Haye, but she looked at Paul—

"I do know," Marketel answered.

"You!" Billy exclaimed.

"Victoria has just been telling me."

"Victoria," Billy repeated.

"Yes," answered Paul Marketel.

Amabelle saw the big man's face. It was darkened, vindictive even. Billy's misfortune, then, touched him nearly. But how? Suddenly she saw down the range of this prosperous man's vision. The money aspect was as nothing. He had seen men shoeless today, and riding a thoroughbred on the morrow. It was something nearer—more personal. It

was something that he could influence—perhaps even change.

"I shall have to sing for my dinner, before I eat it, now," Billy went on. He looked into his cup, and leisurely drank off the tea remaining in it.

"I say," he asked, as he opened his cigarette case and offered it to Marketel, "is it true that you are going to send out an expedition to Thibet, to explore that ruby bearing district?"

"It is true," Paul admitted. "Why do you ask?"

He looked at the eager face, for even as he asked the question he knew what the answer would be, and he laughed with a note which made Amabelle shiver.

"What's up?" inquired Billy, for even he saw that things were not quite normal.

Marketel did not reply at once: when he did, he turned to his hostess.

"Do you know," he said, "there is a good deal of the primitive savage in us all. Veneer does nicely enough for the undisturbed conditions of life, but when it goes down to essentials, man is very much what he was when he lived in trees, and bit the end off the other primitive man's tail because it hung on to the particular bough he'd selected for himself."

He pulled up.

"I didn't know the Thibetan proposition was public property," he said to Billy.

"I am sorry I mentioned it," Billy answered.

"No! No!" Marketel returned, "I might have known that one never can keep that kind of thing to one's self."

"Then," said Billy, "when you fix your crowd, think of me. It's just my style of thing."

"It will be a beastly dangerous job," said Paul roughly.

"What of that?" returned Billy. "I'm not a mother's precious darling."

Marketel was perhaps going to say something that would have made clear the grudge in his mind, and then a motor hooted, as if it were going down by the side entrance.

"Who's coming now?" asked Billy.

Marketel and Lady de la Haye exchanged a glance of intelligence.

"I think," she said, "it must be Roger. He did say something about going to Chipley Magna, to see our man of business."

"What, as late as this?" said Billy.

"Late!" said Paul, and he glanced at his watch. "It's nearly five," he went on, "and I must write my letters."

He turned and went towards the window of the salon, but, as he heard voices in the room, he went along down the terrace. If Roger could return to the place of meeting by the garden door—so could he.

CHAPTER VII

THERE are certain unmistakable milestones on the way to the *pays du tendre*.

One of the most explicit is the photograph. When a man asks a woman for her picture, then you may know that it is only a matter of time—and his feet will stray over the border into the delectable country.

The voices that Paul Marketel heard in the salon were those of Roger and Naomi.

Roger had arrived at exactly this development. He had mentioned the pictures of the room merely as a starting-point. His real objective was the girl herself.

"I know you are ever so clever with your camera," he said. "Didn't your mother show me those photographs you took at Aix?"

The words brought a shadow of doubt, of hesitation, into Naomi's face. Mrs. Melsham had insisted that her daughter's accomplishments should go farther than the complaisant snapshot of the amateur. Proficiency in this line was of a certain advantage in her own form of journalism, and it had flashed into the girl's mind that if she took these pictures, Mrs. Melsham, who scented out any sort of gain, as unerringly as a pursuing animal scents out its quarry—might get them from her and work up "pars" about them.

But Roger was insistent. She refused the offer to send a servant upstairs for the camera. Genteel poverty hides many a secret, odd or sorry, as you look at it, within a woman's trunk. Instead, she had gone herself, and when she returned, Roger met her with the information that Littleport had just been in to remind him that the car was round, waiting to take him to Chipley Magna.

"I must go," Roger told her, with genuine vexation, "but I shall not be any longer than I can help. I suppose," he

said reluctantly, "that we shall have to put off these photographs until tomorrow."

"Well, does it matter if we do?" she asked.

"I wanted to do them now," returned Roger impatiently.

"I don't think anything will have changed," the girl answered gaily—for how little we know what Fate has in store, "if we do wait twenty-four hours."

"Nothing?" he repeated meaningly, with the lover's facility for making something out of a trifle. The girl evaded his glance. She slipped a little way down the room and stood before the table, apparently quite absorbed in admiring a row of Chinese snuff bottles laid out on it.

In reality, she was putting up a screen between herself and her heart's desire. She wanted time—time, not for herself, but for Roger. She wanted him to plumb his own depths. She wanted him to be sure, not from anything her beauty might suggest, but from that inner necessity which, let it be driven off time and again, returns as often to the simple demand "I want you."

If Naomi had pushed Roger by as much as a look, let alone a word—he would have passed this point days ago. It was because of her own somber background that she hurt herself to deny him.

If only *chemin de fer* had never been played at the Villa Paul et Virginie, or she had cared a little less!

When Roger left, after another word or two about business which would admit of no delay, she stood silent in the big room.

It was the drowsiest hour of the day. The summer sun came in through the yellow curtains slantwise and hot, so that it bathed the whole room in a golden glow. Naomi stood with her head down, with her hands clasped. The beautiful things around her had no auction-room value for her, at this moment she neither appreciated their rarity nor their beauty. They presented themselves as symbols of the one thing her life had always lacked—stability. "This will never have to be sold because the tradesmen will not wait any longer," she murmured, as she put out a finger and ran

it round the rim of a little cup in Canton enamel. "These stay here always, no shop has sent them, on the sale or return system," she went on, counting the row of snuff bottles.

She walked on again. Silk that a Parisian dressmaker would have bought—as cheap as she could—and yet at two louis or more the yard, was used for curtains. It wasn't ostentation. Naomi had the sense to see that. It was the befitting thing in the appropriate place. "How good it all is," she was telling herself, "—how peaceful—how *assured*."

An excited voice, speaking rapidly in the hall, broke up her meditations. Naomi lifted her head, and a wave of red dyed her face right up to her temples, and then, receding, left her very white. There is a quality in a Gallic voice which is unmistakable.

Armand de Rochecorbon had arrived. A crisis was at hand—perhaps the crisis that might change everything. In two, three, four minutes, she would learn whether she would have to reckon with an enemy—or at least, a critic—capable of, and willing to do her much harm: or whether the same chivalry that had been meted out to her, when she was hardly more than a slip of a girl, was to be extended to her now. In other words, had Armand de Rochecorbon been infinitely kind to seventeen, or to Naomi Melsham because he really believed that she was innocent of any participation in her mother's ways? Since she had heard that Fate—as Fate has a way of doing—was about to cast up against her the one person she would prefer not to see, she had been asking herself, not what she would do, but what Armand de Rochecorbon would do. The first glance would decide it.

The double doors opened. She could not, she would not look round. Armand de Rochecorbon was talking in his voluble way to Littleport about his car. He was sure no other was so wonderful, or could run so many miles on the same amount of "essence," and then, as he bustled past Littleport, declaring that he was too old a friend to need announcement, there darted into Naomi's mind the certainty

that their first interview would take place without witnesses —a mercy for which she had never hoped.

He was halfway down the room before he saw her.

"Ah, pardon!" he began, thinking that he had a stranger before him, but on the second look he recognized her, her blue eyes, the willowy grace of her figure, and yet he could scarcely believe his own glance.

"Mademoiselle!" he exclaimed. "Mademoiselle—Miss Naomi Melsham. It is Mademoiselle?"

"Yes, Monsieur," the girl answered. "You—you recognize me after all these years?"

"I could not forget you! Impossible! Ah! *Si j'étais libre*——" the young man began, and then something on the face turned to look up to him made him stop.

"*Voyons!*" he said to himself. He waited—he gave her back a look as searching as hers had been pleading. He had evidently come on something unexpected—he was as evidently wishful to take his bearings.

"Monsieur de Rochecorbon," began the girl, for the same humorous twinkle in the sharp brown eyes she had seen in the old days, and a smile, as kind as it was quizzical, gave her a certain hope, "this is my first visit to Zouche."

"And mine," said the Frenchman, "since I married myself with my wife."

"Madame has not accompanied you?" asked the girl.

"Madame," returned Armand, "does not care for travel."

Naomi heard a certain aloofness in the quick voice. It might mean either of two things. Armand de Rochecorbon might have one of Mrs. Melsham's sayings in mind. "A man," she was wont to observe, "with a wife by his side is a masculine possibility spoiled." Or, Armand's thoughts might be turned in on himself. Naomi knew that a good many things had happened since she had seen him last. She had heard of a matrimonial arrangement of convenience, rather than of predilection: she had a woman's quickness for guessing that the little man had had his dream. Frenchmen so often take their dream as the prelude to the book, not as the first chapter of it. She wondered—for when one

loves, love is the first concern—if he was happy with the unimaginative woman who had been chosen for him.

"I hope Madame is well," was all she could think of saying.

The Frenchman thanked her suitably, but Naomi's quickness made another point. De Rochecorbon might not be enthusiastic about his wife, but he was at least cordial, and a man who has a foundation of esteem for the woman nearest to him is rarely cynical to other women. It is the unhappily married man who says the whole sex was made for undoing. Women on the contrary seldom lump men into a bunch.

Suddenly she swept aside the search for an effective phrase, for a single sentence in which she could put her case in its best light.

"I did not know Lady de la Haye before I came here," she blurted out, "I had never seen her before."

Armand made a step of recoil. An Englishman might have murmured that he had forgotten his cigarette case, or that he had not seen his hostess—Armand was not Gallic for nothing. There was a snap about his mind, as well as about his speech. Besides, his Latin temperament found zest rather than embarrassment in what is called, dramatically, a situation.

"Mademoiselle," he asked, "you are telling me something?"

"Yes," said Naomi, almost breathlessly, "Sir Roger—he is an old friend of yours——"

"*Bien sûr,*" admitted Armand, "we were together shooting the quail in Pekin—but I have not seen him since——" He paused.

"He has only just left me," broke in Naomi quickly. "We were going to photograph this room together," and she indicated the camera she was twisting nervously in her hands.

"*Hélas!*" exclaimed Armand, snatching tactfully at the change of subject. "Could I not help—I am, with the camera, *du première force.*"

But the girl threw out both her hands. She came straight to her point. "Monsieur de Rochecorbon," she began, "you remember our last meeting—you remember the Villa Paul et Virginie? You remember that my mother had parties there to play *chemin de fer*—you remember—— No!" she protested, as Armand de Rochecorbon put up a hand as if to stop her. "I must speak. You have not forgotten. No man could forget. I must ask—what are you going to do?"

"I am going to stay at Zouche with our good Roger for—is it not three days?" evaded De Rochecorbon.

"Please—please," Naomi cried out, "don't try to put me off. You were very kind once to my mother—to me too. Will you listen to me now? Did my mother ever pay you back that money?"

"It was so long ago."

"Then she did not," concluded the girl.

Her look was bitter—terribly bitter—for so young a face.

The little Frenchman gave a sympathetic shrug. "Mademoiselle, I am foolish perhaps," he protested, "but I have that fine memory for forgetting."

"You are very kind," Naomi faltered, "but I feel so ashamed. Monsieur de Rochecorbon," she went on, "I know how badly you must think of my mother, and—and of me. Can you believe—I beg you to believe—I have no evidence to offer but my word, but indeed it is true—that that terrible evening was a revelation. It was the first time I understood my mother's—difficulties."

If Armand had hestitated, if he had doubted, he was conquered. He was a man of more acumen, of finer intellect than either his manner or his occupations might suggest. In reality what a Frenchman would call his "*tic*"—and he had a fresh one every two years—first porcelain, then idols, now motors—was energy searching for an outlet. In common with so many men belonging to the old families of France, his connections, political and religious, prevented his participating in the business of his country.

"Écoutez, Mademoiselle," he exclaimed, "have I not said

it is forgotten? Your mother, she is well?" Armand went on quickly.

"Yes," said Naomi. "We are not much together now. Ever since that night I have had such a horror of cards, and——"

"Mais, grand ciel!" retorted Armand stoutly; "it was only the word of Hermann Strum, and who would believe him?"

She caught her breath—repressed a sob. "Many people would have believed his story," she retorted, "they are not all as generous as you, Monsieur de Rochecorbon. Think," she went on with an appealing helplessness, "think if it were known here—what would become of me?"

Armand drew back a step. He realized that in some way he was being asked for a pledge—a pledge which could surely be counted on without asking.

"Mademoiselle," he protested, "you give yourself an unhappiness. Why?"

"Because you do not yet understand, Monsieur," Naomi went on hastily. "You were surprised to meet me here—you know you were?"

"Oh, Mademoiselle!"

"Would you be more surprised if you were to hear that Roger wished to marry me?"

"Surprised?" ejaculated Armand, and indeed the news came to him with such a shock that he covered it diplomatically, and proceeded to lie with that aplomb which the male invariably enjoys when the said lie is concerned with the opposite sex. "Mademoiselle is very beautiful," he protested, and then with a humorous smile he tacked on his inevitable, *"Si j'étais libre——"*

Naomi interrupted his flow of evasions. "Oh, please, Monsieur de Rochecorbon, I am serious. I tried to take life as it came—but I reckoned without my heart." She gave a little bitter laugh. "And in every woman's life there comes a point where her heart comes in and wrecks the best calculated schemes."

Armand instantly became grave. The appeal in the girl's voice touched him.

"*Enfin!*" he answered quickly, "and the schemes of Mademoiselle that Cupid has wrecked?"

Naomi's head was bowed. She turned a little away—then the truth shot out bald and uncompromising. It came in jerking words—just the plain unadorned statement.

"I hoped to marry Roger de la Haye, not because it would be better to live in this beautiful house than in second-class lodgings, not because it is more to one's credit to be the wife of a baronet than the daughter of a mother who——" She struggled with her emotion, which overpowered her for the moment.

Armand came to her side—"C'est assez, Mademoiselle," he urged, "c'est assez."

With a great effort the girl went on—"I hope to marry him because I love him—because I'm another and a better woman when I'm with him."

Armand saw that he must let her have her way—that something vital was to come. "And you tell me this, Mademoiselle—why?" he said.

"Because you know the life we lived at Nice when you met us. I wasn't to blame—I didn't understand," cried Naomi, her voice rising to a clamor. "I was so young then—I didn't realize—until that dreadful Strum turned round on my mother and accused her—believe me I didn't realize it. But you *know* what people said about mama—perhaps about me too. If—if you were asked—could you forget that?"

For one moment the fear of being drawn into collusion with a scheming woman made Armand hesitate; this might be but an elaborately arranged trap. Then, as he hesitated, Naomi raised her eyes—they were blue,—so were those of his little son,—they were limpid,—so were those of Monsieur Bébé. The chance resemblance not only softened Armand's whole being, it endowed him with a sudden far-reaching vision.

This beautiful woman was imploring him to give her a

chance, not that she might attain to worldly advantage, but that she might reach up to a finer mental atmosphere.

As soon as he was sure of that—and Armand de Rochecorbon was swift to make a decision—he took an impulsive step nearer.

"Mademoiselle," he went on quickly, "I have not told you yet. I have a little son. It is three years since I marry myself with my wife, and last year Monsieur Bébé he make his appearance, and papa—when papa has been très sage—veri good—and mama is content with him, papa wheels the perambulator—so," and the little man made a gesture to match. "And ze Engleesh Miss," he went on, "*ma foi!*—so severe, so hygienic, she permit me sometimes, this foolish papa, to hold the sunshade over ze tout petit bald head so pink and so tender——"

Naomi looked up at him in wonder. "I don't quite understand," she said very softly.

"Écoutez," went on Armand gently, "a man with so sweet an interior himself—how can he be hard on those who are without?"

There was an instant's pause. The girl's look was eloquent—for that one moment she realized all that the little Frenchman implied. Not only pity, not only a desire to help, but that far greater thing—confidence in her—confidence that, given her chance, she would take the gold and reject the dross. But as this certainty came to her, words failed her, her attempt to speak ended in a gasping sob and she had to turn away.

"Calmez vous, Mademoiselle," Armand repeated, as he followed her, "calmez vous. That papa he has so much in his mind that he can forget, how do you say it—altogether. And chatterbox as he is, there are *some* things his lips will refuse ever to say."

Naomi heard the promise of silence. The tears came into her eyes. Her heart was beating. It seemed to her that the wheel of Destiny had begun to spin in a new direction. Until Roger came into her life, both people and events had conspired to drag her down, now they seemed to be helping to

fortify her, to strengthen her. She bent her head, her being filled with gratitude.

Armand was as silent as she was, but he was wondering if he dare risk a word of advice.

"You permit one tout petit mot?" he queried gently.

The girl nodded.

"Roger—he know nothing?" inquired Armand.

"How could he?" Naomi replied, "he has been seven years away from Europe—we have known each other less than a month."

"Then tell him—everything," urged Armand.

"Everything?" gasped Naomi, "that is impossible. You know Roger. He is an idealist—he has a fixed standard. He thinks a woman can't go beyond a certain point—can't touch life at its seamy edge, and yet be the woman he loves. He loves me now as he thinks I am—I love him just as he is—whatever he may be, and so I must wait until—until it is me he loves—the real me. Just Naomi, no matter what she is, no matter what she may have been."

Armand looked at her dubiously. "And then——"

"Then, I'll tell him everything and he will understand. Do you think I shan't long for that day? Do you think I shan't hasten it? Love isn't love until it understands as well as forgives——"

Armand nodded his head. "Alors! C'est fini!" he muttered. And then in a lighter tone, "*Voyons!* Let us now to the photographs. *Hein!*"

He took up the camera again, but Naomi stopped him with a little gesture of dismay. She had no mind that her engagement with Roger should be carried through by any proxy.

"Oh, not now," she protested, "besides," she added with an uncertain laugh as she saw the little man already moving over towards the fireplace, "you cannot start there, you know, you are in the wrong light."

Armand de Rochecorbon protested, and he bowed with a flourish—"Mademoiselle, a man is always in the wrong light when a pretty woman puts him there."

Naomi started. The Frenchman's happy *jeu d'esprit* was too apropos to the subject they had just left.

"Don't we all, sometimes, get into the wrong light, Monsieur de Rochecorbon?" she said wryly. But this time the Frenchman refused to follow her.

"De light! Bah! It is but a bagatelle," he retorted gaily, "it depends always on how you make your blinds." With a sweeping gesture he took in the windows of the room, but pulled round sharply as his eye caught the window over the fireplace. "*Tenez!*" he exclaimed. "What is going on there?"

Naomi followed his glance.

From the inner room, across the glass of the closed window, a man's hand and arm were distinctly to be seen drawing together the curtains that would shut in the Chinese Room. The rough gray Harris tweed was unmistakably the sleeve of Paul Marketel's coat, but even as he pulled to the blinds, Naomi caught a glimpse of another hand, long, lean and yellow, which drew the curtains together at the bottom in a claw-like grasp.

"*Sapristi!*" exclaimed Armand excitedly, "there is someone in the Chinese Room, then? *Dîtes-moi!* Who can it be?" for like every habitué at Zouche, he knew the history of the room and the significance of the meetings there. "Is it ce cher Roger, and whom has he for bon camarade?"

"No," said Naomi impulsively, "Roger has gone to Chipley Magna—I told you—he will be back directly. Wasn't that Mr. Marketel—and his Excellency?"

"*Ciel!*" ejaculated the little man, now on tiptoe with excitement, for a habit of diplomatic observation once acquired sticks to one all one's life—that's why the career holds a place apart for seventy odd—"Old Chi Lung and Marketel—together—in the Chinese Room? Oh! La, la, la! Quelle affaire!"

Naomi could not help smiling at him. "An affaire—here?" she laughed.

The little Frenchman nodded emphatically—"But yes—Zouche is old ground for affaires diplomatiques. In the

days of Sir Arthur I have known in that room——" he broke off sharply as a sudden illumination burst on him. Armand had never been within the inner ring of diplomacy. France's fatal habit of thrusting out her best-born, because they are her best-born, had prevented that also, but his interest in national affairs was none the less as keen as any outsider's could be. Therefore he had heard whispers—just that hint dropped by one expert to another—that China was making one of her periodical turns in her sleep—it required but Naomi's chance words to show him which way the Celestial eyes were blinking.

"*Voyons!*" he continued, "Chi Lung and Paul Marketel! It is not for nothing they meet here! Is it possible that we are—how do you say it—in the pie? The lion and the lamb," he ran on, mixing up his metaphors in his eagerness, "they do not lie down together for soft sleeping. *Tiens!* If I could only have ears long enough to hear what they are saying now."

"Would it be so very interesting?" the girl smiled.

"All that is of the most interesting," declared the Frenchman. He came closer, and in his excitement ran both his hands through his hair, cropped *à la brosse,* until it stood up like a thatch of stiff bristles. "Écoutez, Mademoiselle," he went on, "even now in there, perhaps—the East and the West, il s'arrangent. It is an intrigue!"

Naomi drew back—"I am tired of intrigues," she said passionately,—"I wish there were no such things as mysteries and concealments in the whole world."

"But, dear lady," Armand retorted, "what would the poor diplomats do then?" He waved an approving hand towards the Chinese Room. "*Allons!* Let them talk!" he ran on, "Mille blessings on them! As often as the Chinese and the British agree—the German goes to the wall. *Allez toujours,*" he muttered fiercely, "be first in the field for once if you can," and then, as he saw Naomi staring at him he turned with a laugh again. "But come now—to the photographs!" he said, and he took up the camera again.

"*Enfin!*—but it is small—will it make good pictures?"

he inquired, as he moved across to the specimen table and took up a vase of priceless Canton enamel, with a representation of a mandarin and his suite, exquisite in design and execution, upon it.

"Oh, yes," said Naomi quickly, and she little thought the deep significance her careless words were to have later. "These No. 3 Kodaks are so good that even those little mountains on that enamel will come out quite distinctly." Then she turned sharply to find that Littleport was waiting by her side.

The old man was carrying a large round silver tray, and on it were arranged piles of letters. Lady de la Haye's were always placed above Sir Arthur's name (for it was a presentation piece of plate),—Roger's at the foot, those for the guests in order of precedence. Not for worlds would the old man have varied the details of the ceremony.

He had already pointed out her single envelope to Naomi and now he edged Armand's correspondence to him and was just leaving the room when a wedge of sunlight darted into his eyes. Now sunlight, in relation to upholstery, was an enemy against whom Littleport waged a ceaseless war, so he turned back abruptly and proceeded carefully and precisely to draw to the yellow silk curtains.

"You will excuse me, M'am," he said, "but the sun does fade our carpets so."

"Vous permettez?" began the Frenchman, after he had looked up to smile at Littleport's precaution, and he tore open an envelope directed in that spidery hand of the convent-educated Frenchwoman.

He glanced down the lines of close pale writing and then he flung up his head, his face working with excitement.

"Ze bébé!" he cried out, "ze excellent bébé—'e have a tooth. Ah! le brave bon homme! I must send a dépêche —a telegram. Ze congratulations of papa! Littleport! Littleport! Mon vieux! A telegram!"

He rushed out of the room, looking over his shoulder at Littleport following on, and repeated his demand for a telegraph form.

Naomi looked after him. Perhaps once this effusiveness would have amused her—now it touched her.

"You see," she told herself, "he cares too, now that he has someone to open out his heart."

It was a moment before she went back to her own letter. She had left it lying on the table and now she frowned on it distastefully. She knew the writing, as exaggerated as the unduly large cover.

She tore open the envelope. It was what she expected—a bill from the dressmaker.

To account rendered	£97 - 11 - 2	she read—
Lavender Lawn Dress	11 - 11 - 0	
Hat to match	5 - 15 - 6	

CHAPTER VIII

Naomi Melsham stood with Madame Émilie's bill in her hand, and the further she read the more aghast she became. Mrs. Melsham was a past master in turning the screw at the appropriate moment, so Naomi instantly suspected that the bill had followed her to Zouche by her mother's orders, but that was not all. Her three new dresses were each put down at far more than she had been led to believe. As for the account rendered—that was for Mrs. Melsham's own dresses, and was supposed to have been liquidated by an article in a fashion paper, but Naomi knew, since the whole bill had come to her, that sooner or later she would have to pay it. But how?

She began to breathe hard. It was as if she had been climbing up to Heaven, and had been ruthlessly pulled back to Earth.

"Good resolutions," she whispered bitterly, "remove none of the difficulties of the straight path."

This beginning on other lines, which had seemed possible, easy even, an hour ago, a case of good will and pure intentions, was not to be, merely because, honestly, sincerely, she wished it. The past is the octopus of human experience, and where it does not strangle, it is always capable of dragging under.

For the first time, that hardest question that a woman can ask herself clamored for an answer.

"Would it be the surest proof of her love for Roger to leave him?"

The question with all it implied was still in her mind, when the double doors opened with the flourish that Naomi had already learned to connect with Littleport's announcement of a guest.

The girl heard the beginning of a name; she sprang to her feet, her whole being tingling with consternation.

"Mrs. Melsham to see Miss Melsham," announced Littleport.

"Mama," breathed Naomi.

The mother and daughter waited, one looking hard at the other, until they were alone. Naomi spoke first.

"Mama, what have you come for? Why are you here?"

She looked fearfully at the faultlessly dressed woman. It was often possible to gauge Mrs. Melsham's frame of mind by her attire—more especially by the supply of carmine on her cheeks. Mrs. Melsham had evidently come in a discreet mood, for the coloring was so skilfully applied that it was all but possible to put it down to the careful preservation of a good complexion. Her manner, too (for Naomi's mother could be indefinably light at times), bore out the same note.

"My love," she began, and she never prefaced her speech with an endearment unless there was something to be gained by it, "you don't seem pleased to see me."

Mechanically Naomi pulled up a chair. Mrs. Melsham took it, she looked at the tip of her neat suède shoe with a downcast air, and hoped, if she gave Naomi time, the girl would think she had been unfeeling.

Exactly that thought came into the girl's mind.

"Forgive me," she said penitently, "I didn't expect you. I was afraid——"

"Of what?" asked Mrs. Melsham.

"You see," said Naomi, "everything is so different here."

"You don't think I should fit in," mocked her mother.

"Things are so different here," answered Naomi, falling back on a lame repetition.

Mrs. Melsham looked up with a cold smile. She realized that Naomi was possessed with what she called one of her "goody-goody" fits, and for such a mood she had no toleration at all.

"I never knew a girl in love, who didn't compare her

'futurc's' family, to the disadvantage of her own," she observed. "After she is married, she generally learns that she has found a number of new relations who either snub her for not being as smart as themselves or detest her for being smarter."

After that trenchant epitome, she sat up straight and inquired, with her most business-like air, if Naomi had any interesting news for her.

"No," returned the girl shortly.

"I suppose Roger de la Haye is in love with you," Mrs. Melsham went on.

The girl colored a furious red.

"You stood the test of the home environment all right," the cold voice continued.

Naomi threw out her hands. Not a week ago she would have played off contempt against cynicism, and a battle of furious words would have ensued. Now she seemed as if she would push the stinging comments from her.

"Don't, Mama," she protested. "Don't say bitter things. I have learned such a lot since I came here. Let's begin again, you and I—we are always saying horrid things to each other——"

Mrs. Melsham laughed harshly.

"Do you want to reform me?" she asked. "My good child, you are making yourself ridiculous. I'm old enough to prefer caviare to ice pudding."

She rose, and frankly began to appraise the room: she observed that there were several things, to her mind, requiring modification.

"Keep your boudoir in your own hands," she suggested, "don't take it as a legacy, and insist from the first that it has a key to its lock. Above all, strike your own note. If I were you, I'd go in for yellows, just because everyone will expect purples from your hair and skin."

Naomi broke in on this pertinent advice with a sharp question.

"How did you get here? Where did you come from?" she asked.

"The Tippley-Smiths have taken a house at Coboldisham, only fifteen miles from here."

"Lady de la Haye has not called upon them."

Mrs. Melsham did not answer immediately. During the last two or three sentences, she had been wandering down the room, fingering the curios, now she pulled up before the little table and paused to examine the row of Chinese scent bottles upon it.

"Three, four, five—a whole dozen—no, thirteen!" she counted aloud. "How absurd! And how unlucky! What does one want with thirteen Chinese scent bottles?"

"I know," she remarked in another tone, taking up the conversation over her shoulder, while she picked up a tiny flat bottle, with a heavy inlay of gold—"I had rather a difficulty in reminding Ada Tippley-Smith that she couldn't make the first advance. I meant to come alone, and here I am."

She opened the black vanity bag, which hung by a large ring over her wrist, and took out her handkerchief.

Naomi looked up. There was an instant while a great horror kept the girl still, and then she sprang to her mother's side.

"Every item of this collection is catalogued and known to collectors all over the world. Not even the little dealers in the Quai Montmorency would buy a single thing, for they couldn't sell it again without being accused of theft," she exclaimed breathlessly.

Mrs. Melsham deliberately replaced the scent bottle in the middle of the long row.

"Isn't that rather conceited of the De la Hayes?" she remarked—"making such a fuss, as if no one else collected *chinoiserie*. I don't know that I admire Oriental art myself."

The mother and daughter faced each other. Once again Mrs. Melsham's airy disregard for the accepted honesties of existence baffled Naomi.

"What *have* you come for, Mama?" she demanded insistently.

"Partly to see if you have been making good use of your time."

"Mama," cried out Naomi, and then she added passionately, "I believe you would vulgarize a sunset."

"Is that quite—dear daughterly?" asked Mrs. Melsham. "I understood that you were taken with that—disease, when I came in."

Naomi made a gesture of despair.

"I did mean to be nice. You wouldn't let me," she exclaimed.

"Well," returned the mother, "if you set such store by the 'mother's prop' attitude, I can give you a chance of putting your protestations into practice."

"How?" asked Naomi.

"You are so taken up with your own affairs," the well-preserved woman began, "of course I know there is nothing so self-centered as a girl in the 'will he? won't he?' stage, but I may remind you that I can have my troubles, as well as you."

"Have you been losing too much money at cards?" gasped Naomi.

"Staying with Ada Tippley-Smith," retorted Mrs. Melsham. "My dear, our good Ada regrets that the smart set set such a bad example to their servants. She hopes to show that hothouse melons for dinner, and two footmen and a hall boy, can go with a non-conformist conscience."

"Then what has happened?" demanded the girl.

Mrs. Melsham selected a comfortable chair, and settled herself carefully. A soft cushion always acted as cocaine on her conscience, just as a lobster supper made her oblivious of the man who paid for it.

"I *was* right," she observed, "Hermann Strum is in London."

"Mama," gasped Naomi. She looked at her mother as if she hoped even now that she had not heard aright.

"Hermann Strum!" she repeated, and there was still a question in her voice, "you were sure he was dead."

"Do people who know too much about one ever die?" Mrs. Melsham inquired.

Naomi nodded dumbly. She was coming to the value of the announcement slowly, but she would get to it in time —and get to it all the more certainly for not being hurried. Suddenly the girl's arms fell to her sides.

"How do you know?" she whispered.

"He called on me yesterday," Mrs. Melsham explained. "Half an hour later and I should have started for the station and missed him."

"What has he come for? What did he want?" cried out Naomi.

"The truth is," answered Mrs. Melsham, "that he hasn't forgotten my little accident at *chemin de fer.*"

"Accident," echoed Naomi passionately.

"Well," answered Mrs. Melsham, quite unreproved, "I shall always say that if I had been allowed to explain in my own way——"

"One can't explain five aces," Naomi flung back.

Mrs. Melsham shrugged her shoulders.

"I made the mistake of thinking I was playing with gentlemen," she remarked with an injured air.

Naomi had no answer. It never was any good to argue with Mrs. Melsham, but it was not the futility only that was keeping her silent. The scene was so indelibly impressed on her consciousness, that as often as she thought of it, every detail rose up as freshly before her as on the day of its happening. She saw the little room in the tiny Villa, all the tawdry furnishings of the "*appartement garni*": the table covered with a green cloth, the shoe, the tiny rake, the little heaps of money: and she saw, too, not only her mother, as beautifully dressed as usual, not only Armand de Rochecorbon, so many years younger, nor only herself, a slip of a girl, bewildered and timid, but a big loose-limbed man with large hands, and with what struck her particularly, mounds of soft flesh, with long hairs sticking out of them, between each knuckle. This individual had pendulous cheeks, which hung down in flaps as he leaned over the

table and first gesticulated insolently at her mother, and then, as he turned on her, Naomi herself. The thick-lipped mouth leered with a look so evil that the child died in Naomi Melsham, and out of very fear—that instinctive fear of a male at his most predatory—the woman was born.

"You cheated at cards, Mama," Naomi went on. "Hermann Strum found you out. He threatened to expose you, and Armand de Rochecorbon took pity on us. He bought off Strum, and now," the girl ended with a wail, "Strum has come back again."

"Obviously," answered Mrs. Melsham with a shrug. She heard this recapitulation of damning facts without so much as a change of color. She neither denied nor evaded—she merely passed on to something else.

"Tell me," she asked, "who is staying here now?"

Naomi looked quickly round.

"Why do you want to know?"

"Strum has gone into journalism," Mrs. Melsham explained. "It seems he is starting a new paper—*Versions and Animadversions* I think it is to be called: inconveniently apropos, don't you think? But then, Strum never had any sense of humor."

"That man! Editing a newspaper?" Naomi exclaimed.

"Why not?" demanded her mother. "I'm sure he's smart enough. He has offered me two hundred a year to collect society news for him."

"And you'll take money from—him?" the girl demanded breathlessly.

Mrs. Melsham smiled finely.

"Not money, my dear," she corrected. "It's a fee, or is it an honorarium?—besides, it's hardly thought *déclassé* nowadays to be earning one's living."

Naomi let her hands fall to her sides with a hopeless gesture.

Mrs. Melsham rose. She came up to her daughter and slid her hand under the girl's arm.

"Listen, dear," she murmured, using what she rarely

did to her own child—her most insinuating voice—" I am really in a fix this time."

" You! " the girl gasped.

Mrs. Melsham nodded. She opened her bag again and dabbed her nose carefully with her powder puff.

" I didn't want to spoil your pretty illusions about the World well lost for Love, but—we are at the far end," summed up Mrs. Melsham. " Besides——"

" Besides——" chimed in Naomi bitterly. " Ah, you are only trading on our difficulties to frighten me. What do you want? It must be something you know I should hate to do, or you wouldn't play the poverty card."

" You didn't like that time we had to leave Marienbad in the middle of the night, without our boxes, any more than I did," Mrs. Melsham reminded her.

Naomi shrank in upon herself.

" Well, then," pursued Mrs. Melsham, as she noted the movement, " help me to prevent a similar thing happening in London."

" How? "

" Tell me, for one thing, who is here now."

" No one who would interest Strum," Naomi retorted. " Besides all the names are in the *Morning Post:* he can read them there for himself."

" All? " asked Mrs. Melsham, insistently.

" All," answered Naomi—" Oh,—excepting Mr. Marketel. He happened to turn up unexpectedly."

Mrs. Melsham clicked her teeth sharply together.

" Paul Marketel," she exclaimed. " Strum was sure of it."

" Of what? "

" That Paul Marketel would be here. My dear," she went on triumphantly, " Paul Marketel's arrival is no chance, it's part of a prearranged plan. Strum was sure of it—it's wonderful how he gets his information."

" I don't understand," Naomi muttered lamely.

" My dear," Mrs. Melsham continued, " Strum says that

there is a project for a new loan to China—and that Marketel is offering to find the money."

"Why should there be anything secret about that?" Naomi asked.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Melsham, "you have a lot to learn yet, my dear. Germany wants a finger in this loan. It would help that peaceful penetration she's such a great hand at—in the East, but, of course, if Marketel brings it off, he's English, and his interests will be all British."

"Then," asked the girl, "why does not Germany just protest and be done with it?"

"That's the key to the whole business," Mrs. Melsham answered. "As Marketel is a private person, the loan is a private business concern, not an international one."

"Then," demanded Naomi, "why does Strum want to meddle in the matter at all?"

The well-preserved woman turned a little away. She looked steadily before her. To answer truthfully was the very last thing she intended to do, but she had to answer somehow. She hesitated, searching for the most expedient invention.

"You know," she began, "that all Orientals are slippery. This old Chi Lung isn't to be trusted any more than the rest of them. Strum has heard that the old man is thinking of wobbling—of finding out what Paul Marketel has to offer, and then playing him off against the Germans. That's exactly what Strum means to prevent."

"Strum, working in the cause of righteousness," exclaimed the girl bitterly.

"Now," went on Mrs. Melsham, conveniently heedless of the interjection—"this is your chance. Wouldn't it be a splendid beginning for you to see that the Chinaman did play straight? Just the thing you will have to learn, if you mean to be of any use as Roger de la Haye's wife."

Naomi pulled up the flow of plausible words with an abrupt gesture.

"Let me understand exactly what you are proposing I should do," she demanded.

It was a moment before either of the two women spoke again. Naomi looked steadily at her mother; for once Mrs. Melsham was fidgety.

"Well, my dear," she began, "you know old men like you. Couldn't you get round this old Chinaman?"

"And tell you what he says, that you may tell Strum," Naomi flashed out. She turned on her mother and caught her by the arm, her whole being aroused, every nerve tingling with repulsion.

"How dare you," she began incoherently, "how dare you suggest that I should lower myself to cajole that old man, how dare you hint at underhand methods here? I know you, Mama. When you are most plausible, you are most unscrupulous."

"Is that quite the language a daughter should use to a mother?" Mrs. Melsham put in.

"Mama," Naomi protested, "it isn't my fault if there are times when I am not able to remember that you are my mother."

She drew herself up.

"Understand, please," she said, "I refuse to help Strum, in any way, and I refuse to fall in with any suggestions you may make about scheming in this house."

"Then," retorted Mrs. Melsham, in a very even voice, "you had better go upstairs and pack your box."

"My box," gasped the girl. "Why?"

"Because," answered her mother, "Strum made no secret of his intentions. I must either satisfy him, or he will come down and tell Lady de la Haye—of—of my bad arithmetic."

"Tell Lady de la Haye about that *chemin de fer?*"

"That was what he said. I was always sure he wasn't quite what one would call a gentleman."

"But," muttered Naomi, "he can't. He mustn't."

"I know," said Mrs. Melsham, "and with Armand de Rochecorbon here too. Of course there's no real evidence—and it happened so long ago. Things always seem so much less credible if they happened a few years back—but

appearances are against us, my dear. It may take facts to damn a man, you know, but appearances are enough to send a woman to blazes."

Naomi let most of the speech go without comment. She fastened on Strum's threat. She realized that if Hermann Strum once entered Zouche, the doors of it would close behind her for ever.

What was the thing to do now? To leave at once and defy this bully? But that meant giving up Roger—it meant giving up the one ray of real sunshine that had ever crept into her life. Let no one who has not experienced what it means to be shivering, while one goes on pretending one is warm, judge her.

Yet she still kept to her point.

"I can't do it, Mama," she whispered. "There must be some other way. "Can't we buy Strum off?"

"When you buy a man off today, you invite him to return for more tomorrow," Naomi's mother answered. "At least, that's been my usual experience."

The girl walked away. She stood with her head bent. She still felt that there must be some middle course. Even life, which can be so infinitely cruel, couldn't be cruel enough to shut her out here.

"There is one little thing more," Mrs. Melsham went on.

"More," repeated Naomi, turning on her.

"You know that week-end we spent on Dartmoor with those rather common people from Ilfracombe—well, Strum suggests that I may be domiciled there for a certain stated period——" (for humor with Mrs. Melsham was apt to have a very substantial sting in its tail).

Naomi looked up apprehensively.

"Domiciled on Dartmoor!" She caught her breath—a sudden recollection of Princetown and its convicts flashed upon her.

"My child," cooed Mrs. Melsham, seeing that her jibe had gone home, "you are really growing quite—quite acute. Didn't those dear Ilfracombeites of ours call it 'doing time'?"

It said volumes for Naomi's past experiences, that there was horror on her face, but no amazement.

"You mean to say——" she began.

Mrs. Melsham shrugged one of her slim shoulders.

"The name on a certain check was not—er—baptismally—mine," she said, laughing as if, after all, forgery was a trifle—and a rather amusing one at that—"but my fingers happened to guide the pen."

"And the check is in Strum's possession?"

"So he informed me yesterday."

"How did he get it?" the girl cried out.

Mrs. Melsham looked tolerantly at her daughter.

"Does that really matter?" she observed. "The interesting question is—what's he going to do with it?"

"Do with it?" Naomi repeated.

"Yes," said Mrs. Melsham. "Of course you'd be merely the innocent victim of a guilty mother, but would the De la Hayes look on it in that light? People are so narrow-minded still, aren't they?"

She paused and watched her daughter's face. Two lines had come upon it already. There was the hollow shadow of anxiety on either temple.

"Yesterday," Mrs. Melsham resumed, "Strum promised to give me back that check in exchange for——"

"For what——" Naomi gasped.

"For authentic details of this Chinese navy loan."

Naomi sank into the nearest chair. She put her elbows on her knees, and held her chin in her two palms. Even leaving Zouche, even letting Roger believe that she had gone because she was indifferent to him, would not recover that check. It never once entered her mind to doubt that Hermann Strum would act on his threat. She knew the man too well.

"Be sensible," Mrs. Melsham went on, "common-sense may be dull, but it is a serviceable bridge over many a difficult situation."

Naomi looked up hopelessly. She shook her head.

"Remember," said Mrs. Melsham, "the alternative is

prison for me, and with my heart in the condition it is, you know what that would mean."

Naomi put up both hands as if she expected to be struck.

"Oh! Mama," she wailed. "Don't, don't put it like that." She got up with difficulty, as if she were already old and stiff. She walked unsteadily to her mother's side, and stood there, her eyes wide with horror. She was still trying to rally her mind, she was still trying to find the right thing and the strength to do it, and then, before a single ray of clear thought, much less the words in which to formulate it, would come to her, Mrs. Melsham lifted a warning finger. Her quick ears—all the senses must be trained to a fine point for a life like hers—had caught the murmur of voices in the room beyond.

"What room is that?" she asked.

"The Chinese writing-room," Naomi faltered.

"The Chinese writing-room," repeated Mrs. Melsham, in an injured tone. "You might have told me that before. Hermann Strum assured me that the Chinese writing-room hatched diplomatic agreements as if it were an incubator hatching chickens: but I never dreamed it would lead out of the drawing-room—I thought of it up in a turret, all by itself. Who," a sharper note coming into her voice, "is in it now?"

"The Chinaman and Paul Marketel, I believe," the girl answered.

"Naomi!" Mrs. Melsham protested, "and you never mentioned that either. Secretiveness is one of your worst faults. I might have made such good use of the time—and saved you all those scruples."

She hurried to the door as she spoke, and deliberately put her ear to the keyhole.

"Mama!" protested Naomi. She darted across the room, and was about to drag her mother away when Mrs. Melsham anticipated her.

"They are coming out. I hear them. Quick," she whispered, "where can we hide?"

There was a great screen of Chinese lacquer and gold

down one side of the room. Mrs. Melsham darted to it, pulling her daughter after her. She pushed the girl behind the folds before Naomi could protest, and then almost as soon as they were hidden, the two doors from the Chinese Room opened. Chi Lung came out first, Paul Marketel followed.

"Lo!" observed the old Celestial, and he was evidently well pleased, for there was quite a chuckle in his voice, "at last the Babe is born. The man of much money has acquired yet another child for the family of his bank book."

The old man motioned for Paul to pass along. He turned and carefully locked the door, taking out the big bronze key.

"One more lock, one less watch-dog, we say in the Land of Enlightenment," he told Paul. Marketel answered with a general assent. The old man went shuffling along, the key still in his hand. He drew aside the blind, just as he would have done one of his own sun mats at home within the Imperial City. Paul Marketel followed him, the blind flapped to again. The room was empty once more.

"Impertinence!' whispered Mrs. Melsham as she came out of her hiding-place. "To walk off with the key in another person's house!"

She turned to her daughter. There was something indefinably cat-like about her.

"Well!" she rapped out, "will you go in and make a copy of that agreement, or shall I?"

"I—I—I won't steal," protested Naomi.

Mrs. Melsham laughed as if she really were amused.

"Don't forget the alternative," she cooed.

"The door is locked," Naomi blurted out, "you saw that for yourself."

Mrs. Melsham carefully suppressed a smile. She knew that the plea of the impossible is so often the last entrenchment of the wavering mind.

"Prison underclothes, ugh!" she muttered, "and you know that I have so fine a skin that it always chafes under anything less than real Valenciennes."

Suddenly she swung round and looked at the doors into the hall.

"They are pairs," she exclaimed. "I'll lay two to one the same key fits both."

She was across the room in a moment. In as short a space of time, she had changed the key from one lock to the other. It turned the moment she laid her hand on it.

"There!" she cried out triumphantly. "The quality of imagination! Your father never had a spark of it."

Naomi backed away.

"No! No! No! I won't," she clamored.

Her mother turned about. Her lips were in a very sharp line. She wanted to shake her daughter, and looked as if she were about to do it. But, as she swept past the sofa, a falling cushion brought down Naomi's camera with it. Mrs. Melsham saw it as it fell, and it didn't take her more than a couple of moments to see what use it might be to her.

She picked it up and brought it to her daughter.

"My dear," she said, "isn't this your kodak?"

"Yes," said Naomi.

"You were taking photographs of this room?"

"I was going to, only you came in and prevented it."

"For whom?"

"Sir Roger wanted them."

"Then! My dear!" said Mrs. Melsham, tucking her hand under Naomi's arm—"we will do them together, only the series shall include one of the desk in the Chinese writing-room, and on that desk shall chance to be lying the agreement for the navy loan."

"Mama!" Naomi protested. "Mama!"

She broke away from her mother. She hastened to the furthest corner.

"Such a small thing to do," purred Mrs. Melsham, "and so safe. Not a single word in writing—I always warned you against that. I believe ink was the devil's revenge on woman, when he found Eve making such a fuss about the apple."

"No! No! No!" Naomi interjected, catching her breath, tripping over her words in her agitation. "I won't; I—won't——"

The door from the hall opened and Lady de la Haye entered. Littleport had sought her out to tell her that Miss Melsham's mother was in the salon, and the old man's dry manner had not reassured her. The drawing-room may be taken in by spurious gentility—the servants' hall never.

Lady de la Haye began with a courteous word of regret. She had been in the garden: the servants had had a difficulty in finding her: but as she spoke, she was telling herself that she did not like this woman.

There was nothing in Mrs. Melsham's outward appearance of which she could disapprove, but some inner instinct warned her, and while it warned her it both enlightened and misled her. This, she concluded, accounted for the hesitation she had remarked in Naomi's manner. Her mother was not personally amiable.

As for Mrs. Melsham she knew as quickly that she was found wanting. As a rule when old-fashioned people gave themselves airs she knew how to get even with them, as she herself would have said, but on this occasion she wished to propitiate, not to antagonize.

"I am so glad to have the opportunity of meeting you," she said to Lady de la Haye.

She looked at her daughter, and the breath of a sad little sigh fluttered into the room.

"I wished very much to know you myself," she added softly.

Lady de la Haye saw the subtlety of the manœuver. She had not included Mrs. Melsham in the invitation. She was to be put in the wrong.

Mrs. Melsham just gave her time enough to make the deduction, but not time enough to dwell on it.

"I came over to see my daughter about our future plans," she said. "I had received a pressing invitation to

pay a lengthy visit in Devonshire—on Dartmoor. I wanted to consult Naomi."

"And you have come to a decision together?" asked Lady de la Haye.

"I think I have left it to her," Mrs. Melsham answered.

She glanced at the watch on her wrist. "I am afraid I must be going," she said. "Ada Tippley-Smith dines at eight. She sent me over in her motor. She is a dear good soul—but punctual, even to a fault."

"At least let me give you a cup of tea first," Amabelle suggested, for she felt that she could not let Naomi's mother go without some show of hospitality.

Mrs. Melsham smiled playfully.

"I confess to a love of tea," she answered, "but today, may I not mention the dust, and say motoring *is* thirsty work?"

"Then come," said Lady de la Haye, "tea is on the terrace."

She was going towards the window when Mrs. Melsham stopped her.

"My sunshade," she said—"I left it in the hall, and," plaintively, "I do rather dread the glare for my eyes."

"Then," said Lady de la Haye, "we will go out that way."

Mrs. Melsham turned to her daughter.

"You do advise me to refuse that invitation to Dartmoor?" she asked aloud—she looked ahead. Naomi was mumbling incoherently. Lady de la Haye, thinking that the mother and daughter might like a word apart, was passing out of the room.

"I have prevented her drawing up the blinds," Mrs. Melsham insisted. "Now you have a clear course. Hurry, go in and make the photograph. Then do up the kodak in a parcel. Leave the cover—that makes it too large—just wrap up the camera and bring it to me. Say it's lace for the dressmaker or something."

Mrs Melsham turned as she said that. She heard Naomi muttering after her, "Mama! Mama!"

She knew the faltering sounds were coming through dry lips: she knew that Naomi was trembling from head to foot—but she never looked round.

The time for discussion was past. It was better to leave the girl to herself.

CHAPTER IX

It was eleven o'clock on the following morning that his Excellency, the special envoy from China, left Zouche to return to London. Both Roger and Paul were waiting to receive him as he came downstairs. He came up to them, and without once glancing towards the door began to talk as if the whole day were before him.

It was Roger who looked at his watch.

"It isn't time yet, the car won't be round for five minutes," he said, as he repressed a smile, for he knew that Chi Lung had never got over his Oriental predilection for going to a station without any reference to a time-table, and staying there until the engine happened to get up steam.

"The eyes of the venerable have nobler work than to weary themselves with the figures in the book of hurry," declared his Excellency testily, and ostentatiously he walked back towards the stairs.

The hall was long. It was somewhat narrow for the size of the house. The double doors leading to the salon were on one side, opposite them a similar pair opened into the dining-room. Further along were two recesses. One was the entrance to a corridor giving access to Lady de la Haye's sitting-room, the billiard room, and various other small rooms. From out of the other went up the great circular staircase, with the ribs of each step set into a central column, as one sees in the steps at Amboise. Even in the hall there were evidences of Sir Arthur's love of Chinese art. A few fine bronzes topped a lacquer cabinet: more were on a low table, but the K'osse, or, as they were more generally known, *mosaïques de soie*, on the walls were the principal attraction. Savants, curiosity hunters from all over the world, came to look at these great panels of embroidery in silk, which, starting in tones of maize,

mounted up to a vivid orange-red, harmonized here and there with touches of tender green. Each panel represented a typically Chinese scene, and as Paul Marketel asked a question about the one nearest to him, Naomi Melsham appeared within the arch from the staircase.

It was Roger who saw her first.

"At last," he began eagerly. "I thought you were never coming."

"Am I so very late?" asked Naomi, and she laughed uncertainly.

Roger looked at her intently. Carefully as he had marked the variations of her mood, with a view to a more perfect understanding, he knew now that there was an aspect before him which he had not hitherto seen.

"You are tired," he declared. "You look as if you had been in pain."

"I had neuralgia. I didn't sleep particularly well," the girl answered briefly.

She walked on towards Paul and the Chinaman. Roger looked after her. He experienced that sensation of a door shut in his face. Just as it had disconcerted him before, it did so now: and then, being a man and being in love, he found a solution to please himself. Naomi evidently shrank from the mention of her physical ills. So many of the nicest women did.

"She is splendid," he said to himself.

He followed her with admiring eyes. He thought he saw a touch of deprecation in her greeting both of Chi Lung and of Paul, and of course told himself that it must be fancy: but there was no possibility of fancy about Chi Lung's manner. The old man was so gruff, so abrupt, that for the first time in his life Roger thought of his father's old friend as a barbarian: as someone outside the niceties of civilization, for whom an allowance must be made.

"Have you seen this, Miss Melsham?" he hastened to say, and he indicated the *mosaïque*. "This represents 'Shou,' the character for long life."

Naomi was at his elbow before he finished speaking, and she came there as if she needed a refuge.

"Shou?" she repeated.

"With the Chinese, long life is practically synonymous with happiness," Roger explained.

The girl glanced at the eight embroidered genii (and to her they seemed very grim to have anything to do with happiness), seated among a typical Chinese scene of foliage and steep conventional rock work, and as she looked at the stiff attitudes, at the caricatures of human features, she saw in them not a symbol, but a mockery.

"I hate it," she said vehemently.

"You hate what?" asked Roger concernedly.

"Don't you understand?" Naomi answered, and there was a ring of supplication in her voice. "Long life isn't worth anything, *as* long life. Without happiness, it would be a curse not a blessing. Fancy knowing one had to live to eighty, if regret or misery, or even the consequences of some great mistake, went with one all the way."

There was such a ring in the voice, that Paul looked round quickly, and Chi Lung gazed fixedly over his spectacles. Already the old Chinaman hated this golden-haired girl. She had upset a delusion—she came between him and Roger. As a rule, Chi Lung lumped European women together, and declared that he never knew one from the other. As for their garments, they were, in his mind, but so many yards of indecencies.

In this instance he so far individualized as to remark not only that Naomi was very good-looking—good-looking, that is, according to the canons of a barbarian taste, but that her lavender frock accentuated her glorious coloring and the best lines of her figure. Not that he approved: on the contrary, if any "little old woman" of his ever-blessed Middle Kingdom had showed such a disposition to coquetry (Chi Lung gave it a harder name), then that tyrant of the household, the mother-in-law, might be trusted to deal with her. But here, in this barbarous land, there were no salu-

tary ways of enforcing propriety. Even a husband was denied the power of the stick.

"How can a woman know what constitutes happiness?" he asked rudely. "Happiness without stability is like a melon without sun, and a woman will be of the same mind two days together, when the waters of the Yellow River run clear."

Naomi drew herself up. She half turned to Roger as if she were about to ask him to take up her defense, and then she walked along to the smaller door, which faced the big entrance and opened on to the terrace.

It was ajar already, but Naomi threw it back as if she had an urgent need for air. She was trembling and her lip quivered.

"That old Chinaman hates me already," she exclaimed, and then to Roger as he followed her, "Why does he dislike me so much?" she asked.

Roger smiled slowly. In his opinion the answer would involve another explanation, and one concerned with a much greater thing. He was half inclined to speak then and there, to pour out his desires, his hopes. But a feeling, so light as to be a sentiment rather than a resolution, restrained him. It was the lover's susceptibility to an atmosphere. The hostility generated within the hall floated out into the exquisite summer morning.

"Chi Lung does not dislike you," he temporized. "He is afraid of you."

"Afraid of me!" cried out Naomi.

She bit her lip. For an instant it was she who was filled with fear. Had the old Chinaman the faculty of picking out evil, of seeing through the wall of personality, of watching the workings of a soul? She had heard strange things about the occult powers of the Celestial.

This time, naturally, Roger failed to follow her. He read the hesitation very differently, and laughed as a man does laugh when he thinks he sees the wine in his cup of happiness mounting to the brim.

"Never mind Chi Lung," he cried out, "I want to talk to you about something else."

Naomi looked up, her face was aglow with that light which beautifies the plainest woman and enhances the most lovely. Paul Marketel, coming out of the door, happened to catch a glimpse of the transfiguration. He always remembered it, and in the time to come, it grew to be, if not the key to the great enigma, at least a clue to many a puzzling circumstance.

"Roger, his Excellency is by himself, he doesn't look overpleased," he began, for he felt that however provoking the envoy from Pekin must be, so important a person as the Marquis Chi Lung must not feel himself reproved. But as he got so far, Lady de la Haye mounted the steps from the bowling-green.

Naomi went swiftly to meet her, and the two women came back together. Lady de la Haye had a single flower in her hand—one large red rose about to burst into bloom.

The Oriental offers a flower, the Occidental a bouquet. The difference is not without its significance.

Lady de la Haye just took in the fact that the young people were outside, the old man within, then she entered quickly and hastened up to Chi Lung.

"From Zouche," she said, as she held out the rose, and there was an appeal in her low tone.

His Excellency took the flower. There followed a pause. It was not a mere waiting for inspiration. It was obviously something deeper, much farther reaching. It was, probably, that the old man's mind had gone back to far-away days, that he was reaffirming certain vows. He held up his thin, claw-like hand.

"May the house wax and increase," he began, "even as this blossom has still petals to unfold. May the incense of happiness rise up from this house, even as the perfume rises up from this flower, and may the house continue, when the rose has cast its leaves on the floor, for as long as the lantern bearer lights the sky and the orb of gold rises to renew the morning."

He looked round, he saw that Roger had joined his mother. He touched the young man's sleeve.

"Hope of the house," he said. "Your father was my friend. I am your friend."

Then, with that shuffling, soft-soled walk, he moved to the entrance. He would have gone there equally if there had been no car waiting, since he had uttered his last greeting, and when a Chinaman comes to finality, generally by a long route, he leaves.

But the car happened to have anticipated him. He seated himself carefully, arranged the skirts of his coat about his thin knees, and recollecting where he was, so far unbent as to put his hand up to his hat.

To remove it was impossible. A Chinaman who will go bareheaded is a Chinaman conscious of disgrace, or a Chinaman lost to the strongest instincts of his race.

Roger stood at the door. The car disappeared down the long straight white drive, it mounted the narrow bridge with the stone balustrade which led on to the high road. The big gates of beaten iron were open, and so it had not to slacken speed, but swinging round to the left, it was lost behind a belt of trees.

When not a sound, not so much as a hint of the dust cloud remained, Roger still stood looking out. He knew that Naomi had come out to his side, that the others had gone in. It was kind of his mother to take Paul off, just like her understanding mind. A man in love is selfishness incarnate. Roger never recollected that this effacement could not be without its cost to Lady de la Haye. The very proximity of the woman whom he knew he loved with all his heart was such a joy that he delayed to go on to anything further. Presently he would look down, and so provide himself with two separate occasions of delight.

It was a little space of time which Roger cherished in his memory to the last day of his life.

Before him was the sloping stretch of grass, and, dotted about in it were great upstanding oak trees, oaks which had been there hundreds of years, and which, if left to them-

selves, would be there yet as many years again: sycamores, with their smooth trunks peeling in patches, with that fan-like movement of their fluttering leaves. And then, on down the slope, by a winding band of water, which glittered in the sun, was a fringe of gray tinted willows, and, standing out on a little hillock of green, as if flaunting its unique coloring, was a copper-beech, with its foliage of burnished brown.

It seemed to Roger that love had set a term to irresponsibility. Up till now, he had accepted the accessories of his life, without any deeper feeling than that of being glad they were there. Even Zouche had been no more than a house which he loved because it was his. Now, it became the setting for the great fact of human existence. Possession as possession, became a new thing to him. His father had been here before him; after he was gone, there might be his son, his own son, living in this house, just as he lived there now.

It was the first time that Roger in his own person clearly perceived himself to be a link in the endless chain of evolution. The idea seemed to point so distinctly to one universal whole that it gave him a feeling of kinship with the trees before him, with the very blades of grass at his feet: and then, as he gazed, the sight of Paul Marketel's crossing over from the garden to the park dropped back his imagination from the universal to the particular.

"Where are you going?" Roger called to him.

"To exercise my bulky person," Paul returned.

"In this sun," expostulated Roger.

"Why not?" asked Marketel obstinately.

That was precisely the question Roger could not answer. He was pretty well certain that Paul was in trouble—he didn't know how deep things had gone, but he was sure that this big man would never poach lightly or willingly, and so he concluded that probably the exercise was more for the good of the mind than for the body.

"Any letters to post?" asked Paul abruptly. His tone was almost aggressive. No barometer is as sensitive to

atmospheric pressure as is the perturbed lover to opinion—or comment. Paul felt that he could not expose his wound, much less allow Roger to probe it.

"I took my letters before breakfast," answered Roger, making his assertion as casual as possible.

"You did!" Paul exclaimed—"why didn't you let me know and I would have come with you."

"I thought of coming to your room, but I wasn't sure that you would bless my enthusiasm for early rising," said Roger, in a relieved tone, for he wanted to laugh away any impression in Paul's mind that he had been inquisitive.

The big man nodded. Men hate an explanation—women cling to one—and it has been the pit digged for more than one happiness in this world.

"A pity," Paul observed. "I wasn't asleep."

"I'm sorry too," Roger answered.

With that he dismissed the matter, but afterwards he realized how portentous was this checked impulse, how many things might have run a different course, if he had taken Paul down the village road with him—above all, if Paul had seen with his own eyes exactly how many letters were posted, and, possibly, caught a glimpse of the addresses on them.

But not even the cloud no bigger than a man's hand was upon his sky yet. He turned to Naomi.

"Come into the garden," he suggested, "the borders always look their best in the morning; besides, all the blue delphiniums ought to be out by now, and they," he went on so softly that the words were said to himself rather than to her—"must be first cousins to your eyes."

Naomi looked down. Women always appreciate compliments according to their intention. Roger's was prompted by admiration, and she knew what it carried with it.

"Naomi," he implored again.

The girl shut her eyes. She swayed. It had come—the thing so supremely desired that she had sinned to obtain it. Yet, with life at its apogee, she turned cold. She was cast down, not uplifted.

"If only," she whispered in her heart, "her hands had been clean and her conscience untroubled."

But Roger gave her little enough time to think. He caught one hand and then the other.

"Look at me," he urged. "Hear me. Naomi—you know—you must know, all I must say to you."

CHAPTER X

Paul Marketel plodded along on his way to the village, for, whenever it is an affair of the emotions with a man, he craves to exercise his limbs: just as when it is an affair of finance, his instinct prompts him to dine to repletion.

He had said he was going to Zouche, so there he would go, otherwise he had no more reason for taking the road to the left than that to the right. He told himself grimly —he who had seen all the great cities of the world in their splendor—that it would give him something to look at. The time before, when he stayed with the De la Hayes, it was for pheasant shooting, and there had been no time and perhaps no inclination for solitary explorations.

The village, Zouche St. Margaret, to distinguish it from other hamlets on the estate, known respectively as Water Zouche and Little Zouche, with that straggling habit dear to East Anglia, began with four cottages in a row, not a hundred yards from the big gates. They were whitewashed and thatched: they were built of mud and laths, and the longevity and heartiness of the occupants would have been disconcerting to any of those windy enthusiasts who seem to think that the one qualification for holding forth on agricultural affairs is to live in a town.

About three times as far along again, down the powdery road which dipped deeper and deeper between its banks as it neared the hollow in which the village, like all the other long-settled villages of the district, was built,—began "the Street," as it was locally called. More white cottages, more sloping gardens with great white lilies standing up in the sunshine, and with honeysuckle bursting through the hedge all set on the south side of the road, and totaling some twenty-five dwellings, some of them detached, some of them in pairs, with the village shop and post-office com-

bined, where soap elbowed butter, and postal orders were now and again disinterred from under lollipop bottles, breaking the line in the middle. At the farther end, the street was finished off by an ancient inn, white and thatched also, with heavy, overhanging eaves, and a wayfarers' bench of oak, polished with time, under its parlor window, while before it swung the creaking sign of "The Fading Flower" from the top of a high pole.

Beyond the inn was the church, disproportionately large, which had looked down on the comings and goings in Zouche since the early years of the thirteenth century.

Paul's appearance in the street made a certain stir, there was a proprietary interest in visitors from the great house, and not a little reflected prestige from their varied nationalties. Not that Zouche would have owned to any sentiment so universal. It kept itself to itself and, theoretically, looked down on anyone who had the misfortune to be born out of the parish.

Paul had heard about this and it amused him to see the children running along to herald him as "that one from foreign parts."

The women came out of their doors. They leaned over their gates, frankly eager to detect something abnormal, while Martha Sillister, the acknowledged gossip, loudly lamented "him ba'int a mite different from we."

Paul was on the point of asking if the good lady expected two heads, or a pair of noses, when he was anticipated by another woman, younger, and with all the superiority born of Council education and the bicycle, whom Paul heard say, "they had 'em all manner of kinds up there at the Great House."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you," he called out this time, and the two women laughed back at him, not in the least disconcerted, for the ways in this backwater of life were still patriarchal. Lady de la Haye was the friend of the village, its court of appeal, and sometimes its judge, but, through it all, acknowledged to be a woman, just as any other woman, but with a more extended motherdom.

Marketel knew this, and the ease which came from a perfect confidence did him good, for he was in rebellion. There was revolt through every fiber of his being; at the unfairness of his own position,—at Victoria's.

He plodded on up to the churchyard and turned in at a little gate in the mellow brick wall. A path ran along from it sloping up to the church. It was bordered by more rose bushes, there were flowers between the humble furrows in the grass, more flowers in all the odd corners, while against the old gray church tower, a climbing rambler showed a wealth of starry white blossoms, and the long arms of a creeper trailed over the porch. Whoever ministered to death here, performed their service amid beauty and fragrance.

Paul came up to the porch. Considered from an architectural point of view it was an excrescence: an arrangement of oak beams, roofed with lichen-covered tiles, some two hundred years younger than the church itself, but somehow, it was roped to, merged into the stern stone walls by its covering of vivid green.

Inside, it was provided with a couple of benches, and Paul dropped on to the shadier one, removed his hat, and took out a cigarette. He was still raging, he was still smarting. Love—his love—the very best he had to bestow, was to be sacrificed to the prior rights of a man who was such a dilettante about marriage, that all he asked was to postpone it as long as he could.

Paul suppressed a very hard word between his teeth, and even as he said that he heard a voice and a laugh.

There was no mistaking Billy Hirst's laugh. It would have been a cackle had it been only a little less spontaneous.

Billy had evidently been paying a visit to the Rectory. It wouldn't matter to him if he went alone, and now, as he came from the house which had stood there when the sixth Edward was King, the two Rectory children were clinging round him.

Billy was always at his best with children, notwithstanding that in one candid moment he had asked Roger if he

could imagine him, Billy, with a little precious coming down to Sunday lunch—and, as Paul turned his big shoulder to look between the ribs of the porch, which were crossed with that cheerful disregard to precision which makes the works of the medieval builder a perpetual delight, he saw, not the possibilities of tenderness or the promise of a very human heart, but the astonishing ease with which this young man helped himself to the feast of life.

"D——n the beggar," muttered Paul.

Billy disposed of the small boy clinging round his knees. The little girl was more difficult. One small fist was drumming on his head (Billy always averred it was the hardest part of his anatomy), the other white arm encircled his neck, and the small person resolutely refused to be dislodged from her perch on his shoulder. Finally, and after some further argument, he bent and tipped the little feet on to the ground, then, with another of his infectious laughs, he kissed the little discontented face, and pulled the long hair.

"I say," he assured both children, "I must be off now, but I'll come back tomorrow, and then just see if we don't have a game of hide and seek."

He ran down the path, waving to the two, singing a snatch of a very gay ditty.

Perhaps nothing irritates those to whom life is a stern parent so much as seeing those to whom she is an indulgent one. Every step of Paul's career had been a transition from one hardness to another. His mother died before he was six. His father made as if to throw himself into the grave upon his wife's coffin, and married again within the year. There was no place in the second Mrs. Marketel's scheme of existence for Paul. From the first day she saw the bullet-headed little boy, with his unruly crop of hair and his stiff jaw, with eyes that stared at her disconcertingly, and a power of silence, her one wish was to get him out of the way.

In time, as her own children were born, and proved to be a string of seven daughters, her dislike grew into some-

thing not far from positive hatred. Her husband, always a weak man, lapsed into valetudinarian ways, and fell more into the "anything for peace" habits. That involved sacrificing Paul, and so Paul was barely sixteen when he found himself an outcast, dependent on his own exertions for the very first necessities of life. Now, when he was amazingly rich, Paul rarely referred to these lean years. He had taken much of the rough and little enough of the smooth in Mexico, in Australia, in various places in South America, but one thing he had always done, he had always kept his hands clean.

Paul's honesty was not an affair of expediency or good form, it went down to the very foundation of his being. The hard life brought out all the strenuousness of his character, and also it accentuated his loneliness. He had always possessed a distaste for the tawdry, the second-rate, the blatant. Many of the men, and practically all the women who would have come near to him in these rough times, made him shut down his finer self under a case of cold reserve.

Fate had so arranged it that he had missed the school link, the college link, the link of a profession or of a pursuit. Of course, when he came back to London, with a reputation as an international financier at his back, and established himself in one of those spacious houses, with paneled walls and molded ceilings, which are to be found in the older London squares, his stepmother made advances to him and whined about the expense of seven plain daughters.

Paul arranged an allowance for her, signified his intention of dowering each half-sister, and resolutely refused to see her.

Slowly, shyly, tentatively, he began to go out. Very little at first, and then, as one invitation brought many more, with a kind of amused aloofness. Just as no uncivilized beauty had been able to upset his equilibrium, so now no net more skilfully spread could catch him. He derived immense amusement from his detached estimate of all the

pretty girls, the dangerous widows, and the scheming mamas. The one thing which gave him active pleasure was intercourse with such men as Roger de la Haye, but he always took it for granted that his real life—the life, that is, of the soul, as apart from intellectual appraisement or the workings of his acute brain,—would be lived alone, until he met Victoria Cresswell.

The very steps, or rather bounds, by which her individuality impinged on his consciousness, were entirely characteristic of the man.

He had been taken to call at her little house in Egglestone Place. He went unwillingly. He only stayed a few moments, and at the time he hardly knew what impression he carried away. It was not until some six hours later, when he was going up the easy, spacious stairs of his big house, and stood on the gallery which ran round to the various rooms, looking down into the bare hall below, that, in a flash, Victoria came back to his mind, and he saw her so distinctly that it was hard to convince himself that it was a trick of his imagination, and not she herself, walking towards him up the stately stairs.

The fantasy set Paul's heart beating. Love has such unforeseen ways. It awoke in Roger de la Haye's heart through his eyes. It awoke in Paul Marketel's through his imagination. Yet one man was a diplomat (and intuition is a diplomat's most valued possession), and the other was a hard-headed financier, whose chief attribute might certainly be put down as common-sense.

Paul Marketel stood motionless while all the clocks in the great city tolled the hour, and with that stillness about him, which in these fine old houses defied the rattle of modern life; with the shadows below him and the shadows above him, he watched in his mind's eye till Victoria came up to the last step. Then he turned quickly and walked up to a pair of double doors. He threw them back as if he were announcing a guest so honored that the mere fact of appearance was a condescension, and turned up all the lights.

The great long room was bare of furniture. Its newly-painted walls were long lengths of cold whiteness. The blaze of light, glittering out of three great crystal chandeliers, reflected itself on to one of the Adam's finest ceilings. Paul had always meant to set about the furnishing of this room, and as often had put it off. What did a bachelor want with a great drawing-room? he once asked one lady who, with more zeal than discretion, offered to pick up suitable things for him. Now, all in a twinkling, he saw that room not only furnished, but occupied. Victoria was seated by the fireplace. She was in some description of high-backed chair: her white hands were lying on its arms of dark carved wood, but her face was looking down the room. She had come up the stairs to him, as his guest. Here she was seated with a welcoming smile, waiting for him as if his house was as much hers as his.

Paul looked on the vision of his own making and knew what it meant. He recognized what had come to him. This was love. He had seen his woman, the one woman in all the world to him. The conclusion was instantaneous —and final.

Now, with his worship—for it was a worship, not a mere outburst of desire—on the one hand, with all the hardness of his lot and the tantalizing certainty that he possessed and was yet denied, on the other, Paul looked out and saw that Billy Hirst was running over the Rectory lawn, instead of walking out by the drive as a caller should have done.

In another moment Billy would open the Rector's own gate into the churchyard, and must certainly pass by the porch. Paul rose at once. He would rather come out than be discovered.

"My hat," cried Billy as soon as he saw the big form, "now if this isn't luck. You are just the very man I want to speak to."

"Am I?" returned Paul stiffly.

"You bet," answered Billy, with all that gay confidence of his, "I hope I shan't bore you."

The two men turned together. They went out of the churchyard side by side. Billy was evidently at home in Zouche, in point of fact Lady de la Haye and he were distantly connected. He had a greeting for each woman. He knew them all by their names. Old Martha, notwithstanding the handicap of nearly toothless gums, exchanged a brisk flow of wit with him. One girl, with a daisy-like face, asked him to be godfather to the baby in her arms. But on being assured by yet another feminine acquaintance that he would certainly have to kiss the mother at the font—he promptly declined.

Paul looked on, and envied. He would never come to this point of ease if he lived among the dear souls to the last day of his life.

"I do talk awful rot, I know," apologized Billy, when they finally left "the Street" behind them.

Silently the two men stumped along, until Billy proposed that, instead of turning into the Park, they should walk on: and to Paul's astonishment, the suggestion was made in a halting voice. So even Billy, the debonair, could be diffident.

That instantly gave Paul the lead.

"You said you wanted to speak to me," he began. "What is it?"

Billy pulled up. He turned about and faced the big man, and there was a suggestion, indefinable but certainly there, of the subaltern to the superior officer.

"I say," he began abruptly, "as that ruby expedition to Thibet is in the wind, I want to say I'm your man."

"What do you mean?" asked Paul.

Billy moved off one leg on to the other. He put his hands into his pockets and took them out again.

"I mean," he said, and the hesitation had come back into his voice, "give me the job. It's just in my line. Let *me* take out your expedition."

"You," ejaculated Paul.

"Ain't I good enough?" shot forth Billy.

"Good enough?" repeated the big man irritably.

"Yes," returned Billy, "straight out, one way or the other, am I or am I not good enough?"

"Good Lord!" ejaculated Paul. He moved aside and switched off a head of sheep's-beard that had raised up its crown of delicate, scarcely tinted flowers from the prevailing green of the bank. Then he poked his stick into the soft grass, and rammed down a leaf that had dropped before its time from the horse-chestnut above.

"Everyone knows what you can do," Paul announced, as he swung back; "if it comes to fitness I don't know of a better man."

"What's in the way, then?"

Again Paul looked away. His face, with its unremarkable features, grew grim, stern, and that obstinate jaw of his stuck out as if it meant defiance, as if it would enjoy to defy.

There was quite a long pause. Even Billy, who was as dense about human mental conditions as he was acute about physical signs, such as tracks of game in the wilds, or the neighborhood of water in a desert, felt that something was passing. He looked up, wondering, and when Paul saw that there was not even the most distant apprehension on the face before him: that whatever cloud there might be on the other's horizon, it was assuredly not the particular one obscuring his own sky, he blurted out one word.

"Victoria," he said.

"Victoria?" ejaculated Billy, "what do you mean?"

"What will she think if I let you go?"

"She'll be only too pleased. Why shouldn't she be?"

"There's bound to be some danger."

"What of that?" answered Billy.

"Victoria must know that it won't be exactly a picnic."

"You don't understand," answered Billy. "Victoria is sensible. She is used to it. It's the kind of thing I always do. The only thing I'm good at."

Paul brought down his stick with a thump—on the road this time.

"What I want to know," he cried out roughly, "is: Do you think Victoria will marry you one day?"

"Yes," returned Billy, "I suppose so, some day," and then, because he was a real man at heart he added, "I'm not good enough for her, of course."

Paul shut his lips tight. If he opened them to say as much as a word, he would break out into a vehement protest. He would demand Victoria from this man who looked on his possession in so easy a light: he would go further, he would give notice that he would fight for her, take her by force, if there were no other way.

A bird rose up with a sudden sweet thrill. A breath of wind stirred the leaves of the overhanging chestnut, and then the sun suddenly shot through its heavily leaved branches, and, dropping its light on to the white road, the shadows from the trees patterned it until it looked more like finest damask than just a stretch of heat-scorched country dust.

That gave Paul time to collect himself. The wave of interior savageness shocked him. He wasn't a primitive man dealing with a primitive woman. He was thinking of the most exquisite feminine personality the world held, in juxtaposition to coarse notions. He was lowering to earth that which should be placed as high as the stars themselves by his own unrestraint.

All the man's reverence, all his feeling for the exquisite, rebuked him.

"Lord," he muttered under his breath, "what a deal of the brute there is in me!"

Paul Marketel had never had time for nice temperamental deductions, or he might have comforted himself by remembering that a solitary outburst is in no way the measure of a man. It is repetition that points to a fundamental trait, just as one aberration is in no sense the indication of a man's moral outlook, while the type of women to which he instinctively gravitates is its surest criterion.

Another prompting came into Paul Marketel's mind.

This one made him breathe in gasps. It was an insidious idea, it was as tempting as it was easy, and as practicable as easy. It was fathered on the "let a man's blood be on his own head" deduction. It was presented to the accompaniment of "if a man knows what risks he is about to run, whose fault is it if he breaks his neck?" Billy had pointed the way, not to a hunting expedition, but to his own superseding—on exactly those ancient lines of King David and Uriah the Hittite. A dozen things were possible with an expedition to such an undiscovered country as Thibet. Billy would be constantly taking his life into his hands, and he, Paul, would be sending him there to do it. It was true, as he had already told himself, that Billy was going with his eyes open, but it was not what Billy was going to do, it was what he, Paul, would be waiting for—actually hoping, or all but hoping for—which counted. It was that possibility of an open door to Victoria which would be for ever in his mind.

He pushed a hand deeper into his pocket and set his jaw firmly. He knew then and there that there was one thing he could not do—he could not send Billy out to Thibet.

He half turned to say so, and then, strong as he was, a last impulse of temptation assailed him. Here was he refusing the ideal man for his expedition. Why? For a whim—for a refinement of conscience? If Billy had come to him, standing by himself, he would have said, "You are my man, go at once," but because the situation was weighted with the most intensely personal element which two men can find set between them, it had been transformed from an ordinary business agreement into an act of personal treachery—and he, Paul, knew this.

He stumped along ahead with such a set face that Billy could do nothing but follow on behind, telling himself ruefully that somehow he hadn't got the hang of things, and then, as abruptly as he had hurried ahead, Paul pulled up—

"Look here, Billy," he said, "I may as well tell you

straight out, there's no personal reflection on you, but I can't offer you the Thibet billet."

Billy could only stammer, "Lord! Why not?"

A sudden wry smile crept up on Marketel's face.

"I've thought of a fellow called David," he said—"he seems to have had a prior right to this situation, and——"

"Oh, never heard of him," returned Billy,—"but of course that don't matter. I wish you luck."

"Thank you," said Marketel grimly.

CHAPTER XI

Even the most wonderful day has but sixty minutes to its hour, and twelve hours between midnight and noonday.

Roger walked through this summer day, from the time that Chi Lung's car passed out of sight to the hour when the men returned to the salon after dinner, in a kind of bewilderment of happiness.

Neither he nor Naomi had taken anyone into their confidence. The silence was Roger's suggestion—the outcome of that masculine exclusiveness which, pushed to its farthest limits, suggests the veil and the purdah—but which he translated to himself as just one day before congratulations, settlements, and all the material business of matrimony began.

Naomi was content to let him have his way. The acquiescence came from her heart, not from her head: she had all to gain by publicity. Even the least charitable hesitate to make damaging comments to a man about the near relations of his future wife.

Yet, she was ill at ease. Her interior misgivings grew more insistent. They were intensified by certain awkward events of the previous night.

The fact was, Naomi Melsham had walked in her sleep. She had only done it twice before, as far as she knew, and each time it had followed distressful happenings. The first occasion was after that terrible game of *chemin de fer,* and her mother found her dealing cards and muttering about aces. The second time had followed a crisis when the girl had passionately refused to be pushed into a repugnant marriage.

This time, she had awakened to find herself in Victoria Cresswell's room, with the cover of her kodak in her hand, and Victoria by her.

At the time, she had been too dismayed, too fearful, to find out if she had revealed anything. Then the morning had been passed with Roger, and after lunch Lady de la Haye had carried off Victoria, so that it was not until dinner was ended that Naomi found her opportunity.

"I want to thank you for being so good to me last night," she began.

Victoria brushed the suggestion aside. Helpfulness had been so much the predominant feature in her life that she did not even say it was lucky that Naomi had chanced on her door. She merely remarked that she happened not to be asleep—she gave no explanation of her wakefulness. She had seen Naomi walk in, and that was all.

"All," faltered the golden-haired girl, "didn't I say anything?"

"Just some rubbish—one always talks nonsense on such occasions, doesn't one?" returned Victoria. "You kept on repeating 'Two keys will fit one lock,' or something like that."

There was no time for more. The men entered.

Roger made no pretense—he took no devious course—he went straight to Naomi.

"It is a glorious night, and ever so warm outside," he pleaded.

Billy had slipped through the open window already (four walls always oppressed him), and he was inviting anyone to whom it might appeal, to camp out for the night.

Aimée had so far responded to the invitation, that she had followed him out on to the terrace, so there was ample excuse for Naomi to go too, but she only shook her head. She knew what passionate words would be whispered into her ear—all the protestations the darkness would cover. She didn't feel fit to listen. Every syllable would be uttered under a misconception. What she had done, she had done because of the greatness of her love, and, already, that action was shattering the lovers of the city of her dreams.

Armand de Rochecorbon went to his hostess, and pres-

ently the conversation—for Lady de la Haye possessed the gift of making others talk—drifted away from international difficulties; from the movements foreshadowed for the future, and the tendencies of modern development; to fasten itself on such a purely domestic theme as the remarkable precocity of Armand's little son.

"Voyons, chère Madame," the Frenchman declared. "A child of such intelligence! *Tiens!* The little bonhomme will pluck the handkerchief out of the coat of papa, and he has but ten months."

Paul straightened his powerful back—the back of a man who has carried heavy weights for long hours—and his eyes, screwed up under thick eyebrows, grew misty.

A domestic picture will leave a man totally untouched, up to the very moment that it becomes a possibility—or, at least, an aspiration—for himself, and then no detail can be too homely. Goethe knew that when he pictured Charlotte cutting bread and butter.

Involuntarily, Paul looked down the room again.

Naomi Melsham, in a white gown which shimmered with a suggestion of moonlight, would have been the first attraction to most men, but Paul Marketel had eyes only for one woman.

Victoria was in black. Paul liked the women he esteemed to appear in black. Not that he was naïve enough to imagine that sable raiment was any guarantee of disinterestedness, but because those who had tried to make money out of him, or who had offered him certain things at their own valuation, were associated in his mind with glitter and show.

Like most people possessed of much wealth, experience had forced one observation upon him. He had learned that the woman who will accept the least, is the woman to be trusted the most. He was innately generous, but it never occurred to him to buy favor with gewgaws. The man who does that, and who takes a pride in seeing his banknotes pinned on to pretty shoulders, is generally ready to repeat his experiment elsewhere on the morrow, and he

leaves, too, under the impression that cash down has liquidated the whole of his debt.

Then, because Marketel was staring harder than he knew, Victoria looked up.

Their eyes met, and the involuntary communion in their glance made the girl color.

Paul wrenched himself round. It was unbearable that Victoria should be shamed because he loved her. The thought of Billy and that ruby mine sprang up in his memory—yet even here he was just, for justice is a habit, and what we do habitually in placid times, we do almost automatically in the stressful occasions of life. Billy had asked for the command of the expedition on his merits. There was grit then, after all, in this intolerable procrastinator where the holy state of matrimony was concerned.

De Rochecorbon broke up his angry train of thought to ask if by any chance the man whose usual preoccupation was the financing of the kingdoms of this world had an opinion on the relative merits of two patent foods for infants.

"No," said Paul, "I am afraid I never gave either of them a thought," and then, as he was telling himself that only a Latin, with his acceptance of the things of nature as natural, could have asked that question with just that good faith—Littleport threw open the double doors, and standing back against the right one, he announced, "His Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung."

The arrival was so unlooked for that as she heard it Lady de la Haye knew it must portend something out of the ordinary. It was certainly a reversal of settled plans, for Chi Lung had expressly stated that he intended to leave England the next day, and the Celestial, though he can lie, when he decides that the occasion is worthy of it, with an aplomb which no man of European blood can match, is yet too finished an artist in tergiversation to fritter an untruth away unnecessarily.

There followed a brief delay.

Paul Marketel (who perhaps because he was the least happy was the most analytical) wondered what wave of association made every face turn as though there were danger ahead.

Lady de la Haye had risen from her seat, and Paul came up close to her. He had always admired her. His sense of what she was passing through, of what she was renouncing, and of how it must hurt her—ordinary as the situation was—had made him wish to be numbered among those she called her friends.

The Frenchman, with the *flair* of his race for emotion, ran his carefully kept hand through his hair.

Roger, maybe, was the least concerned of the assembly. He was still too happy to think of a cloud in his sky. He walked to the door.

And so it fell out that no one had a glance to spare for Naomi Melsham. She drew back nearer to the wall, as if to take advantage of any shadow that might lurk in any corner. She put one hand to her side, as if her heart was beating until it hurt her. She craned her chin until her neck lost its pretty fulness, and became long and stringy. Her mouth remained a little open, and from either side of her nostrils to the corners of her lips appeared long, deeply carved lines.

While everyone conjectured what had brought back the Chinaman she alone knew. While everyone was uneasy, fearing possible bad news, she alone guessed precisely what that bad news would be. It was this possibility that had spoiled the glory of her day. Sooner or later, she knew, Chi Lung must discover the theft and proclaim it, but she had not imagined that it would come so soon or in this house.

Then, as Littleport looked back into the hall, as though wondering why the guest tarried, as Lady de la Haye looked up at Paul (for, instinctively, she appealed to the strongest personality present), the little old Chinaman appeared.

He shuffled through the opening. He kept on until he

came into the very middle of the room. There he pulled up, directly under a lantern of old Chinese lacquer with pierced ivory sides, and the glimmering light came through to show the bent figure and the face, set as impassively as if it were of alabaster, yellowed with age.

Though his Excellency was usually sufficiently careful of the petty conventions beneath which the "barbarians" of the West hid their inferiority, he was still in morning costume. He had not even taken off the long rusty-brown cape which he preferred to a coat. His hat was still on his head, and as he stood he dropped his oblique eyes downwards and made no attempt either at an explanation or a greeting.

In their turn neither Lady de la Haye nor Roger approached him. They knew too much about the Far East for that.

Presently the old Chinaman straightened himself—he turned, and deliberately marked who was in the room.

The little, dulled, but still so-farseeing eyes, came as far as Paul and then stopped. The old man raised both hands to his head—he removed his hat, and deliberately, as if it were a ceremony, he set it down on the carpet in front of him.

Lady de la Haye shivered. When a mandarin casts his head covering before him, then he knows he is disgraced, and that the invitation to "eat the leaf of gold," i.e., take his own life, will not be long delayed.

"O man of money," Chi Lung began, for when, at last, he found his voice, he had put off all cover of European ways and gone back to the spirit, the methods, the imagery, of the land of his birth.

"What is this that has befallen me? What is this that has come to you? Are the spirits of evil angry? Have you provoked them with your success, or is it I who have forgotten that I am of as little merit as a cracked vessel? Are the souls of my fathers and of yours turned from us and insulted, or has some debtor slain himself at your doorstep?"

Paul Marketel walked up to the old man. He faced him, and that silk hat was still between them.

"Your Excellency," said Paul very quietly, "I do not understand. Tell me what has happened."

Chi Lung looked up. The two pairs of eyes demanded an explanation, each from the other.

"Lo!" continued the Celestial, "I will speak plain words. The terms of the navy loan, which you, O man of the West, offered to me, a man of the East, for my august Master—the Son of Heaven,—are known in London. Our lips were to be silent: our tongue was not to move in our mouths, and yet the sheets of intelligence already have them written out in their unlearned characters, and what was meant but for your eyes and for my half-blinded ones is read by the coolie carrying water—by the loafer reeling to his poppy pipe."

"Are you sure?" shot out Paul.

"I am not behind a lattice! I am not a woman! I do not cry out that I have heard a giant when a mouse scutters over the floor!" the little man answered contemptuously.

Paul bowed ceremoniously.

"Read, O man of money," went on Chi Lung, and he brought a newspaper out of his pocket and thrust it before him.

Paul took the sheet. There it was plainly enough: "Terms of a New Navy Loan for China. The Well-known Financier, Mr. Paul Marketel, Takes up the Whole Issue."

The news was a "scoop" (to use a journalistic phrase), at the last moment before going to press, for it was hastily blocked in, and the letters blurred and askew. But it was evidently the outcome of exact knowledge, not of supposition or hearsay. The facts and the figures were correct, and as Paul read he thrust out his chin and into his eyes came sharp points of light.

He crumpled the paper as if he would include some traitor in his grasp. He looked back at Chi Lung.

"Someone has had access to our memorandum," he exclaimed.

It was Lady de la Haye who spoke first.

"Someone from here!" she cried out.

"Someone who was in this house yesterday," returned Paul.

"This matter must be gone into—and at once," she declared, with a decision which would have matched that of her late husband.

She drew herself up, and moved back her long train with a steady hand.

It was then that Victoria slipped from the room. She had either to leave or to walk up to Paul and take her stand by his side.

Women generally pay as they go along. As Victoria stepped through the window, she paid the price for anything that might be underhand in her relations with Paul.

Naomi Melsham was the one person who saw her go, and she knew—for desperation lends a fine instinct to deception—that her safest move would be to follow, and so dissociate herself from anything there might be to come. Yet she hesitated. The very physical strength to carry her away was lacking.

Paul heard the swish of a woman's gown. Roger heard it too. To both men the sound came as a signal that, metaphorically speaking, the decks were being cleared for action.

"Your Excellency," began Paul, "will you tell me why you have come back yourself to be the first to announce this evil news?"

The old man pushed his hands into his sleeves. He could have given his answer in four words—but he did not mean to do it.

"There were but two copies of the agreement," he murmured blandly.

"Well?" Paul's tone was short, he was staring hard at the unsmiling eyes. Chi Lung gave him back stare for stare.

"*I* used the learned characters of my country."

Paul suddenly understood.

"You come here to insinuate that *I* am at the bottom of the theft," he cried out.

Chi Lung made a deprecatory movement.

"You think that I sold a copy of the agreement to the press," Marketel went on. He threw back his head. The accusation was so absurd that he was almost amused by it.

"It must have escaped his Excellency's mind," he said (and he addressed Lady de la Haye), "that I have all to lose and nothing to gain by this publication. Besides," and here he rapped the newspaper wrathfully, "his Excellency forgets. The exact terms of the loan were inserted in *his* copy only—in mine they were left blank. The figures given here are correct. I assure his Excellency I carry my copy on me, and I give him my word—the word of Paul Marketel is usually considered as good as his bond—that it has not left my possession since our last meeting."

The little old man bowed. He dropped his eyes on to the ground. He was evidently ruminating on what he had heard.

Paul's reasoning had seemed so conclusive that Lady de la Haye watched Chi Lung closely. She felt sure that his nice acumen would demonstrate to him that whoever might be the traitor it was not Paul Marketel: and then, as she watched she saw the old man bend lower and lower. He seemed to be making his small body smaller, leaner still.

"Your Excellency," Paul went on sharply, "has *your* memorandum ever been out of your possession?"

Instead of a reply there followed a pause. Paul waited, and his face grew sterner. Lady de la Haye waited, but she grew more troubled. At length, when Armand was breathing sharply with excitement, and Roger's whole frame was stiffened with wonder as to what might be to follow, the old Chinaman looked up.

"Honorable man of many ingots," he began suavely, "your words bring balm to my distressed spirit. I have heard the truthful reasoning, and my soul is assured that

your memorandum has not chattered as if it had a woman's tongue. I came like a fool—and I have found but my own foolishness—I go forth to trail my gray head in the dust."

He pulled himself up, made a curious movement which reminded Lady de la Haye of the Celestial's homage of casting incense on the shrine of the honored dead, and then, turning aside, his Excellency prepared to leave Zouche as abruptly as he had arrived.

"But, your Excellency," protested Roger's mother, "I do not understand."

"Mais c'est épatant," declared Armand.

It was Paul Marketel who intervened.

"Your Excellency," he announced, "you cannot come here and accuse me of being a thief, and then, because I have shown you the absurdity of the charge, say you are satisfied and take your leave—that settles nothing. If I did not sell the memorandum to the press, someone else did. *Who* did? We have got to find that out."

"Barbarian," retorted Chi Lung, "why will you meddle? Your stream runs clear, what is it to you if filth wells out from another fountain?"

Paul moved right up till he all but touched the little man.

"Your Excellency," he demanded, "will you give me your word that *your* copy was never out of your possession?"

"My word?" retorted Chi Lung. "Man of no father, and the son of who knows whom for a mother, learn that Chi Lung is answerable to no one but his own Master—the glorious Son of Heaven."

Lady de la Haye sank into a chair. She was trembling from head to foot. The old Chinaman, instead of acceding to this most natural request, had retorted with a phrase which, from a Chinaman, amounted to a calculated and deadly insult.

She looked at Paul, and Paul had put on that impassive face which made him seem as if he were a man of stone.

"Your Excellency," he said slowly and very quietly, "you have gone out of your way to insult me. I do not

resent your uncalled-for expressions. I am only sorry for you, for I can assure you that whether you wish to or no, there are certain questions which I intend you to answer."

The old man heard the challenge. He was being rated as if he, the Special Envoy of the Son of Heaven, could be commanded, coerced, and, rarely as any light came into his old, eyes, they blazed now. None the less, he merely bowed and made another attempt to turn away, but Paul Marketel followed. He was holding on to his point as tenaciously as a bulldog holds on to its prey.

Suddenly Roger anticipated him.

"Mother—Paul—" he cried out, "don't you see—his Excellency is trying to shield *me?*"

"You?" cried out a new voice, almost as quickly, and the tone was shrill in its evident dismay. "You? What have you to do with this?"

It was Naomi Melsham who spoke. She hurried out from the shadow of the curtain and there was urgency in her face—in her voice—in her jerking, swift walk.

Roger went to her at once.

"I was with his Excellency and Paul yesterday," he explained. "I was watching the negotiations on behalf of the British Government."

"You?" Naomi repeated, "you were in the Chinese Room too——"

"Yes," answered Roger, "his Excellency knows—I left again by the garden door, after——"

He broke off. He looked at his mother with a trapped air. He looked at Marketel.

"Paul," he went on, "have you forgotten—his Excellency's copy was left in my keeping?"

The momentous admission rang into the room. Amabelle was too versed in diplomatic procedure to have the least doubt as to what this would imply.

Paul stood still. Armand was motionless for once. Only the old Chinaman shuffled softly towards Roger as Naomi spoke again.

"Roger," she gasped, and she swayed as she stood there —"but you—you *told* me you were going to Chipley Magna."

"A diplomatic fiction," Roger answered, and already his tone was weary—"I was present all the while."

He disengaged her fingers and stepped aside. He saw where all this was leading. The Foreign Office had selected him to watch the negotiations: they had made an urgent point of secrecy: yet not only had the terms of the loan been made public, but the betrayal had obviously been effected while the memorandum was confided to his care.

In that very first moment he knew what consequences would follow. There would be an inquiry. He would be held guilty of gross carelessness even if he were exonerated from the actual theft. Moreover, he would not be given a second chance—the rising diplomat of the morning was a young man ruined now—condemned to *déponabilité* because he had let down his Government, had diminished its prestige and given the enemy cause to jeer.

He waited a moment, with all these bitter certainties surging through his mind—then he bit his lip as if he were stabbed by a sudden pain. He had caught again a glimpse of Naomi, and to him, her drawn face, her staring eyes, could have but one meaning—she was realizing how the evidence was going against him—perhaps she was condemning him—perhaps she was wondering how she could have been so deceived in him.

He wanted to cry out to her. He wanted to ask her to suspend her judgment, but he shut his lips without permitting a sound to pass them. He turned resolutely to the others. He looked at each face in turn as if to intimate that if he were in the last ditch, he would at least die there like a man.

It was Chi Lung who answered the defiance.

"Son of the Venerable and Beloved," the old man implored, "could not the strings of your tongue have been still? Son of him with a heart as flawless as a crystal from the Great Mountains, could not you have recollected that

speech is for all the world—that silence is for your own heart?"

The wailing tones ceased. Each one present in the room felt that the old Chinaman had expressed something which lay unvoiced, unaccepted, in each of their minds—but still there.

Suddenly Roger hastened to the center of the room. The light from the lantern fell on him, it showed that hunted look already drawing down his mouth, already changing the expression of his eyes.

"Mother," he began, and he spoke in a low, tense tone, not as a hurried assertion, but as a reasoned statement—"I must tell you what his Excellency has not—his copy of the memorandum was left in my desk all the evening—I gave it back to him about midnight."

"But why?" gasped Lady de la Haye, and she looked at the old Celestial—"why did your Excellency leave it there?"

This time the old man would take no further part in the discussion. He had done his utmost—for the present—and it had been of no avail. As an exhibition of Western plain speaking—unnecessary plain speaking his Excellency held—Roger's behavior was so exasperating to him, that tacitly he withdrew, and passed the question over to him who would play a losing game with all the cards on the table. Roger required no further prompting.

"The memorandum was left for me to translate for the Foreign Office. You see," he explained in a dull voice, "being in Chinese characters, it seemed perfectly safe to leave it in my desk."

"Tiens!" cried out Armand impulsively, "then any—any other one who copied it—he, too—must read the Chinese."

"Yes! Yes!" thrust in Naomi breathlessly, "it was written in Chinese—and——" She broke off sharply as the swift realization came to her of what these words implied. But there was such an urgency in her voice that the old Chinaman moved round. He deliberately examined the

beautiful girl—and from this point onwards, he was always careful to keep her in view. Her exclamation had passed without notice from everyone else, but then, Chi Lung alone disliked her, and there is no searchlight more powerful than aversion.

"But," objected Marketel, keeping steadily to the point under examination, "let's get this clear, Roger. Do any of us here understand Chinese?"

There was a moment's deathly pause.

"*Ma foi,*" remarked Armand, with a stillness that was ominous in itself—"I do not understand it."

"Nor I," contributed Marketel shortly.

"Persian's my limit," Billy announced.

It was Amabelle de la Haye who clutched her son's sleeve.

"Roger!" she cried out, and the word seemed to be pressed through her lips by something stronger than her own will.

Roger drew himself up and stepped a pace forward. His friends were waiting for a word from him. Their faces showed what they expected that word to be.

"Yes," he said, "no one could deal with his Excellency's copy who does not understand the language—and I—I alone in the house can read Chinese."

Lady de la Haye must have known that this was the only truthful answer her son could give: each of his men friends must have known it too, but his mother sank aside and his friends looked at each other with that dumb consternation which a man does betray when he is up against hopelessness of a certain kind.

Suddenly Naomi began to sway. Her knees shook under her. She had caught Chi Lung's eyes fixed on her, and the look was so malignant that she retreated down the room, right back towards the windows. What the old man deduced—what that keen mind had guessed in its moment of illumination, no one was ever to know. But suddenly he startled them all by giving vent to a low, prolonged chuckle.

Lady de la Haye made a movement to go over to the old man—as if she feared the stroke had been too heavy for him, but with her first glimpse of his face she stopped short.

"Your Excellency!" she exclaimed, "you see some light in the darkness?"

Chi Lung waved her away. He shook his head. "I grow old," he muttered. "When the teeth fall out the tongue wags loose."

He turned about—shuffled aside.

No one had seen Naomi Melsham but himself, and he was fixing her face in his mind. Not a line on it—not the circles that had suddenly come up under the eyes, nor the eyes themselves—rounds of staring, starting dismay—escaped him. He saw the graceful figure, with its shimmering draperies, blot itself out, as it were, behind the curtain, and then he drew up his head.

"Behold!" he announced, "the wrath of honest men gives the thief time to arrange his face——"

And having made that cryptic comment, his Excellency marched determinedly from the room.

CHAPTER XII

Almost every woman, at any rate every woman whose days have been lived among the alarms and perils of empire making, as she grows older and looks back, can give definite dates for the distinct epochs of her life. Here, irresponsibility fled and responsibility took its place: there, youth was quenched and maturity began.

Lady de la Haye was no exception to this rule, she could look back on several transformations. The first distinct one was the terrible time just before Roger was born, when Sir Arthur was offered a mission of great danger. As a servant of his country, it seemed to him that he could not shrink from it, and his young wife sat hour after hour in a foreign house, in a foreign land, waiting for the birth of her child, striving for composure, for calmness, while by day, by night, was always in the background of her mind the certainty of the perils her husband had to face, the dread, the hideous dread that not only might he be made a prisoner by barbarians, but that once in their hands he might be done to death inch by inch.

There had been other times of stress, of familiar walking with death and disaster, but no anguish of mind had ever seemed to the beautiful woman with the white hair at all comparable to that she endured in the hours that followed Chi Lung's return to Zouche de la Haye. Whatever there had been previously, there had at least never been even a suspicion of dishonor. It was this dishonor that appalled Roger's mother.

Her guests had left her as soon as they could after the moment when Roger admitted that he alone knew Chinese.

Chi Lung had glided out through the windows on to the terrace, and after that he seemed to vanish. The other

men had taken themselves off—Billy with an almost sheepish air, De Rochecorbon lost in a wealth of interjections. Only Paul Marketel, the next sufferer after herself, had stayed behind in the salon.

It was quite a long time after they were left alone before he spoke. Then he came up to Lady de la Haye's side.

"Take courage," he advised, a soft note in his big voice, "Roger will be cleared somehow."

He stood thinking, while Lady de la Haye with tears in her eyes tried to smile at him.

"Chi Lung has something up his sleeve," Paul went on. "I did not understand what he was driving at, but an Oriental does not let his suavity go and hurl insults for the mere pleasure of relieving his feelings."

"I know it was part of the repayment of the debt we spoke about," answered Sir Arthur's widow. "Directly Chi Lung saw that events seemed to be incriminating Roger, he endeavored to take the blame on himself. In China, justice is always more or less vicarious. Any head will do as long as there is a head forthcoming. Chi Lung proposed himself as a scapegoat, and you, with your European notion of making the punishment fit the crime, insisted on finding the real culprit, instead of being satisfied with any expiation."

Lady de la Haye broke off with a dreary laugh.

"It is the everlasting difference between East and West," she added with a catch in her voice.

Paul Marketel smiled gravely. He took a turn up the room—another down again.

"The man who could offer up himself," he said, "is not the man to let Sir Arthur's son labor under an unjust suspicion. We know that Roger was incapable of selling the memorandum, and therefore Chi Lung will set about seeing that he is cleared."

Lady de la Haye returned his glance.

"Chi Lung will never rest until he knows everything," she answered.

"I shall go to him tomorrow," Marketel said. "I shall

put myself under him, I shall work under him. We shall clear Roger, you will see."

Lady de la Haye thanked the big man for his determination. Paul lighted a cigarette and stepped out on to the terrace. The white-haired woman went up to the room she had always used since Zouche was rebuilt. It comprised the half-circle of the western turret. The curve was set with five little windows so arranged that the sun came in first through one, and then through the other, almost from the first moment to the last that it was up in the heavens.

And, as Lady de la Haye dismissed her maid, Paul Marketel's words echoed in her mind. He had spoken them to comfort her. Sooner or later, he affirmed, Roger must be cleared. But he had forgotten one thing. There must be an interval, longer or shorter, while Roger lay under suspicion. If his mother knew anything of such thefts, and she had heard of others analogous, it would be longer, not sooner, before the matter would be cleared up. The thief must have been as astute as those of his or her class are bound to be. It might, therefore, be years while Roger was forced to idle without an occupation, with his ambitions thwarted, with his career cut short. For, of course, with this suspicion hanging over him, it was almost a question of hours until Sir Arthur's son was called on to resign—if even he was allowed that mercy, and not publicly dismissed.

Lady de la Haye sank into her chair, as the picture of what was bound to ensue rose up in her mind. She had lived too long among the limited world of diplomacy not to know how the story would be bandied from chancellory to chancellory, how one confrère would pity, another deride, a third sneeringly remark that there was bound to be a woman in it somewhere. She could fancy how it would be whispered about over the teacups, referred to—discreetly—as the champagne went round. The mere thought of all this and so much more smirching her boy's fair fame, sullying his youth, and searing his soul,

seemed to Amabelle de la Haye more than she could bear.

She started up. She did not know where she was going or what she was intending to do. It was a blind impulse to take action, no matter of what kind, and then she suddenly stopped short. She listened. Overhead in the room above, a room shaped just as hers was, someone was tramping across the floor. It was no mere passage from one point to another, it was a steady pacing to and fro.

Lady de la Haye understood. Roger was suffering as she was, even more than she was. He was young, and youth will have it that life has not only endless potentialities, but that it has a right to happiness as well. He had hitherto been so successful that this must have come as a stinging blow on him.

Suddenly the tears came up in Lady de la Haye's eyes. She was old—middle-aged at least—she knew that few things survive their illusions but love and integrity.

The impulse was to go up to her only child. But Amabelle de la Haye owed almost all the influence of her life to her power of putting herself in other people's places. She understood that if Roger had wanted her, he would have come to her. She understood that to intrude on him, to offer sympathy, would not be a consolation but an indiscretion.

She stopped short. Yet another thought struck her. How would this affect Roger's relations with Naomi Melsham? Not two hours ago she had been very near to deploring her boy's choice, now, if Naomi withdrew, she felt that it would be a base thing.

She stood still quite a long time. Above, the tramping to and fro never paused, within the room was a heavy dull silence.

Lady de la Haye shivered. In common with all people who have lived in earthquake countries, she took particular notice of atmospheric changes. Now, even in the midst of her sorrow, she was sensible of the heaviness of the air. The weather was evidently about to justify the American jibe as to three days' sunshine and then a storm.

The tall woman, in the clinging garment of soft white silk, with her white hair in two long plaits falling either side of her colorless face, with the dark eyes gleaming out of sockets defined and enlarged by the black shadows beneath them, went across to the farthest of the little windows. She began to draw up the blind. She opened the casement, latched it back. She looked out into the park. On that side the night was dark. It was a summer sky deepened by a dull cloud, rimmed with an angry glow right down on the horizon.

Nearer at hand still, in the park itself, the trees were motionless with a peculiar stillness. It was as if the coming storm had deprived them of their power of swaying about, as the hawk deprives the shuddering rabbit of the use of its limbs. Then, almost under the window was visible the line of the old wall, and, coming from over it was that faint perfume which testifies to flowers and cultivated things.

Lady de la Haye leaned out for a long time. There was the tramp above her, beating into her consciousness, until each footfall seemed to strike a blow on her temples. Presently, she went on to the next casement, she pulled up the blind there, she fastened back this sash also.

As she did that, the stillness ended and a rush of wind, cold, boisterous, shook among the trees, rattled at the windows. The first rumble of thunder followed. Lady de la Haye listened to it and was glad of the disturbance among the elements. She waited, watching for the first gleam of the lightning, which came, opening and shutting, as it were, a shining lid in the heavens.

Lady de la Haye moved on to the remaining casements. She set them all open. She trusted that the storm would come up speedily. She hoped that the lightning would cut into the room, the thunder rattle through the house. Any sound, any noise, would be welcome relief from that unceasing, monotonous tramp above.

When she came to the last window, the one quite within

the angle of the turret, the one which looked along the front of the house, she stood, with the sash in her hand.

If she was keeping watch, if Roger was keeping watch, there was yet a third person keeping vigil.

There was an answering gleam of light from the turret facing her own. Across the way, but one blind was upraised, and from the space it left, struck out a shaft that seemed to glow against the heavens, with a scarlet brightness that fell out, in a long straight wedge of light, until it struck on the pavement of the terrace and lit it up with great splashes of whiteness.

Lady de la Haye knew who occupied the other turret room. Roger had stipulated that it should be apportioned to Miss Melsham. Therefore Naomi, in this the hardest hour in the life of the man who was so plainly attracted to her, was keeping watch too.

Amabelle de la Haye turned abruptly away. For one moment self and a dull anger intervened. Not even in his misery was her boy exclusively hers any longer, she shared him with another.

Sir Arthur's widow bowed her head. She had never been so unutterably alone.

She drew down her own blind abruptly. The light from her window must not challenge the light from the opposite window.

She went to the dressing table, pulled off her rings. She turned up the electricity over the mirror. She looked at herself. The sight of her own face seemed to drive herself into the background. What had she to do with anger, with resentment, and Roger still pacing above?

She leaned forward, looking at her own image in the glass.

All at once she cried out to it.

"Even if my boy is cleared," she bewailed, "who will give him back the years that the locusts have eaten?"

The very next morning exactly what Lady de la Haye had feared came to pass. Sir Aylmer Brent telegraphed that he would be at Zouche before lunch.

Sir Arthur's widow knew what that meant. Generally, the Foreign Office is more deliberate, but there are times, especially if it works unofficially, when the department rouses up and acts with reasonable celerity.

She knew equally that Sir Aylmer's visit was unusual—a concession. Ordinarily, Roger would have received a summons to Town, or a stiff official intimation.

Sir Aylmer Brent, a middle-aged man with a noncommittal manner, and the pale eyes that seemed to see without looking, was shown straight into Lady de la Haye's own sitting-room.

The white-haired woman, her face already so much older, —for the well-preserved fall before sorrow as ninepins go down before a dexterous ball—rose from her writing-table, at which she had not penned a word. She stood up straight, silent.

If Sir Aylmer had looked to see Roger, and Roger only, he showed no surprise. He and the woman before him had known each other for years. Sir Arthur had always declared that Aylmer Brent had both ability and talent, and considered his resource and his grasp wasted by the routine work of the permanent official.

"This is a bad business," Sir Aylmer began, with no perfunctory opening, and the abruptness of the words contrasted curiously with the deliberate low-toned voice.

"Of course, Sir Aylmer," returned Lady de la Haye, since they were to play with vizors up, "you know my son is incapable of betraying the terms of the Chinese memorandum. That is my standpoint. It permits neither of modification nor deviation."

The man before her bowed. He showed a very bald crown, and, as he straightened himself, he glanced but once at the face before him, then deprecatingly turned a little sideways and dusted a speck off his blue serge sleeve.

"Mr. Marketel is as sure on that point as I am," insisted Roger's mother.

Sir Aylmer smoothed his closely trimmed mustache back from his rather large mouth this time.

"Is Mr. Marketel still with you?" he inquired.

"I requested all my guests to stay until this afternoon after your visit," answered Lady de la Haye.

The man before her heard the desperation in her tone. It was as if he were missing something, and an official of the Foreign Office does not like to miss things.

"I do not quite follow," murmured Sir Aylmer Brent, very blandly.

Amabelle de la Haye drew up her head.

"Surely!" she protested, "you are not going to spoil my boy's life without taking the trouble to make at least a few inquiries."

Sir Aylmer looked at her. Not a muscle of his jaw relaxed, there was not so much as a flicker of the scantily fringed eyelids, and yet somewhere about him was that which suggested sympathy, and moreover, a sympathy that was not born of the inconvenience of the moment, but which would be enduring.

He drew forward a large armchair, and set it where the warmth of the sun fell on it.

"Won't you sit down," he said, "and let us talk things over?"

He seated himself opposite, and yet, for a very long time, he had nothing to say.

The woman, with her hands grasping the supports of the chair, with her head erect, with her mind strained until her eyes remarked and her memory registered the merest trifles —how a fly buzzed behind the window panes: how the Chelsea figure on the stand to her right was an inch or so out of its place—waited too. She had herself in hand now, and as she kept silence she began to see what was to come. She knew that Roger's superiors had already held a consultation, for Sir Aylmer had begun his telegram with "I am directed to," and at that consultation, hasty, informal, as it must have been, they had made up their minds that her son was guilty.

"Sir Aylmer," she faltered, when she could no longer bear this waiting.

"Your son had no money difficulties?" he demanded, almost under his breath.

"I can answer for that," Roger's mother returned.

The man by her side cleared his throat.

"There are expenses," he began, his manner as indefinite as his words, "expenses, I mean, that——"

Lady de la Haye broke in on him. She was so driven that she answered the halting insinuation with the plainest of speech.

"You mean," she returned, breathlessly, "that my son might be entangled in some way. You may not believe me, but I can answer for that also. Besides——"

"Ah!" thrust in Sir Aylmer. "Besides——"

Lady de la Haye colored. After all, though she was certain, Roger had said nothing in actual words to her.

"Sir Aylmer," she began again, "I seem perhaps to contradict myself. I implied just now that I was in my son's confidence. Now, I am going to tell you what is only surmise on my part. I am certain, had it not been for this trouble, that my son would have told me before now of his attachment to a lady who is now staying in the house."

The middle-aged man rose. He looked out of the window.

"I am afraid I must ask the lady's name," he murmured.

Lady de la Haye gave it promptly.

"Miss Melsham," repeated Sir Aylmer, as though impressing the words on his mind. "Miss Naomi Melsham!" and as he said that, the door opened, and Roger himself walked into the room.

The young man came along with his head in the air. His face was pale, his mouth set, there were blue lines already about his nostrils. He walked straight up to the man by the window.

"Sir Aylmer," he began, "had I known you were here, I should have asked you to come first to my room."

"I came down," answered Sir Aylmer, as he turned and looked steadily at Roger de la Haye, "prepared to receive

your resignation. That seemed the best way—taking your father's eminent services into consideration. But now, I should like to ask you one thing. The answer may not affect my instructions, but I would not fail to repeat it, if it were satisfactory, in the place where it might serve you. You, alone, know Chinese? You admitted that yourself?"

"Yes," returned Roger.

"The memorandum in Chinese must have been the one copied: can you suggest anything yourself?"

Roger glanced for a moment at his mother before he answered. He realized that once again the magnetism of her presence, her indefinable persuasiveness had prevailed, and that he was being given this chance because Sir Aylmer had been received first by Lady de la Haye.

He had gone over every point in the case so often, that he could refer at once to the one possible opportunity for theft.

"There was but one chance of the memorandum being stolen to copy," he said. "It was left in a certain drawer in my writing-table when his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung and Paul Marketel went out into the salon."

"Did you see Chi Lung place it there?" put in Sir Alymer.

Roger shook his head.

"I let myself out by the garden door a moment before," he answered.

"Had you agreed that the memorandum was to be placed in this particular drawer?" went on Sir Aylmer, and his voice never rose and his manner never quickened.

"Yes," answered Roger.

"Why?" inquired the low, deliberate tones.

"Because," answered Roger, "that particular drawer closes with a spring, and can only be unfastened with a key."

"Which key you had——" rounded off Sir Aylmer.

Roger colored.

"Yes," he cried out. "It was on my watch chain. It had never left my watch chain, but——"

Sir Aylmer, still in his silky manner, took up that "but."

"But——" he echoed.

"Once, recently, that spring has failed to lock the drawer," Roger explained. "I pulled it open by the handle."

Sir Aylmer passed his hand over his white-skinned crown.

"And," he said, reflectively, "you wish to infer that it might have done so again."

It was Lady de la Haye who replied to that.

"My son mentioned the incident of the spring's failing to work to me," she said hurriedly. She looked at Roger, she looked again at Sir Aylmer. "Miss Melsham was with me at the time," she went on, a ring of agony in her voice. "I am sure she will remember Roger's speaking about it if you ask her."

Roger put his hand on to his mother's arm. The man in the blue serge looked up at last.

"There remains the Chinese," was all he said.

Roger caught his meaning.

"And on my part, Sir Aylmer," he cried out, "there remains my word. I give it you on my honor. I am innocent."

The stout man bowed. He kept his eyes down. He walked into the center of the room. He almost turned his back to Lady de la Haye.

"I must return to town by the 12.40 train," he observed.

Roger walked after him: came up: stood level with him.

"You wish to take my resignation with you?" he demanded.

Sir Aylmer did not look up.

"Those were my instructions," he murmured.

Roger's lips went white. He had expected this, but when he heard the fact put into words, it hurt like a blow. He looked over his shoulder, past his mother, out on to the terrace. There was a strange silence about Zouche de la Haye. Even the animal life seemed to be stilled.

The clock in the pretty room ticked on. No one moved. At length Roger spoke.

"My mother is very tired," he said, "so if you do not mind coming with me while I write——"

Lady de la Haye interrupted them. She came up to the two men with a gasping sob.

"Sir Aylmer! Sir Aylmer!" she cried out. "You have forgotten, there still remains one thing. How could Roger, even if he had wished, have sent the memorandum from here in time to be printed in the evening papers the next day?"

The Foreign Office official looked at Roger again. The glance gave a tacit permission to make the most of this argument.

But not a gleam of hope showed on Roger's face. On the contrary he threw out his arm as if he were pushing away something that threatened to close in and smother him.

"Sir Aylmer," he answered, "I do not care to hide from you that I walked to Zouche post-office yesterday morning before breakfast. But in any case, the old postmistress could testify to that fact, because I asked her particularly if a letter posted before eight would be in London by noon."

"Roger!" bewailed Lady de la Haye.

A flicker of a smile came over the young man's face. It was about as festive as a wreath of gay flowers laid on a tombstone.

"I was excited. I could not sleep. I wanted something back speedily from London," Roger went on. "I posted three letters. I will give you the addresses on them if you like."

Sir Aylmer Brent bent his head.

"Thank you," he answered, in his smoothest tone. "I think I need not trouble you to do that."

CHAPTER XIII

While Lady de la Haye was doing battle for Roger with Sir Aylmer Brent, in the little Queen Anne room, his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung had taken up his position on the terrace midway between the windows of the salon and those of the Chinese writing-room.

The morning still showed the influence of the storm of the night before. The brilliance of the previous day had been changed to a subdued tint. The sky was mostly gray, dappled with low, fleecy clouds of yet a deeper shade and in the gusts of wind there was a biting touch of cold.

Then, as chance and as uncertain as the weather can be in these eastern counties, the clouds lifted at one corner, as if some invisible hand had pushed the gray a little aside, there was first an access of light, and then a glimmer of real sunshine, though that sunshine was but pale and half-hearted.

The Chinaman arranged himself at the point where any warmth there might be fell on him. He sat in a chair pushed back against the house, his knees were drawn up before him, his feet precisely planted on a footstool, his long coat carefully wrapped about his thin old limbs. His head was topped with the invariable silk hat, while over his left shoulder he held open a particularly large umbrella. Taking the picture as a whole, his Excellency resembled one of those carved ivory images of a mandarin which used to be brought home by seafaring folk, to the infinite enjoyment of the dwellers by the hearth.

His Excellency sat blinking, with his eyes half-closed, apparently absorbed in that serene indifference which cannot even be called meditation.

Not a sound came out of the salon. Victoria had taken

Aimée into the park. As for Naomi Melsham, no one had seen her. She had breakfasted upstairs—and there was neither a word nor a sign from her.

But Marketel had betaken himself to the stretch of green before the terrace. He was pacing to and fro, with Billy Hirst, keeping an anxious eye on the house, and so it fell out that no sooner was Chi Lung seated in his chair than Paul nudged his companion.

"Look," he said.

"The old duffer might be asleep," Billy observed.

"As much asleep as a cat when it blinks on the top of a wall with a terrier prancing just below," answered Marketel.

"That's about it," the other agreed.

"I wonder," Paul went on, "what his Excellency wants."

"Why should he want anything?" Billy asked.

"You know," answered Marketel, "that the ways of the Celestials are their own, and generally as devious as incalculable. You may be sure that our friend there did not drag out his old bones to shiver in that wind for the mere pleasure of taking the air."

"Can it be to keep an eye on either of us?" Billy suggested.

Marketel shook his head.

"It's something farther fetched than that," he said.

"I tell you what," he went on, "I'm going to give the old fellow a chance. If he wants to say anything to me, I'm going to make it easy for him."

He turned again, neither hurriedly nor determinedly, but with a desultory movement, that would have matched the Chinaman's own gait under similar circumstances. When he was close up to the steps, he took out his cigarette case, and with it open, remarked, in a vexed tone, that it was empty.

Billy grunted. However astute the healthy young Englishman may be, there is rarely one who does not cherish contempt for a manœuver. Billy would have gone up those steps two at a time, and dropped into the chair next to his Excellency, with such a thud that it groaned.

Marketel, on the contrary, kept up the play of indifference to the end.

"What! Your Excellency out here!" he began as he came up to the quaint figure half-hidden by the umbrella.

Chi Lung looked up slowly, out of narrowed lids.

There followed a moment's silence, and then, maybe, the old man concluded that there was a certain advantage in Paul's presence, for he observed that "It was only in the time of ice that such a wind blew in Pekin."

"Poor old British climate," laughed Paul lightly Then he put his back against the railings and waited.

Chi Lung went on blinking, sitting motionless, looking as if nothing in heaven above or on the earth beneath had the slightest interest for him.

Paul drew up a garden chair. He set it sideways so that at one and the same time he could look down the terrace and yet watch the old Chinaman.

The minutes went by. A European would have felt it incumbent on him to make a remark, but Chi Lung had no mind to waste words for the mere sake of making his voice heard. Paul began to feel the need of a cigarette, but he dare not move. He was perfectly certain now that Chi Lung was on the terrace for some reason, and that he must find out what the reason happened to be.

"I trust," he began, and purposely he employed an involved turn of speech, "that your Excellency's needed sleep was not broken by the disturbance in the heavens last night."

The old man slowly drew up his long yellow lids.

"My poor slumbers are not worthy of your honorable inquiries," he returned.

"When the mind of the venerable is filled with conjecture," observed Paul, "then the strings of the eyes are fastened back."

It was quite a long time before the Chinaman replied to this imitation of Oriental hyperbole.

"The old often sleep indifferently," he evaded at length.

"Ah!" cried out Paul, "then your Excellency was troubled with some new thoughts on this mystery?"

He turned in his eagerness. He set his two hands on his knees, bent forward, but the thin old man opposite merely put up his fingers (the little one with the nail left so long that it looked like a claw) and laid them flat together against his mouth for a moment, then, very leisurely, he began to stroke his straggling beard.

Paul was more impatient than he cared to confess.

"Your Excellency," he expostulated. But all the answer he received to this renewed appeal was a tilting of that large umbrella.

"I am as sure as I know you are," Paul persisted, "that Roger had nothing to do with the betrayal of that memorandum. What his friends must do, what those who profess to care for Roger must do, is to clear him and find the real thief."

The old man's hands went out with a movement of mock deprecation. "Behold!" he blinked, "from the lips of the unlearned comes wisdom. Disinterested service is one of the benevolent acts enjoined by our great Masters."

Paul pushed back his chair with a grating sound, he rose abruptly.

"If your Excellency has formed any conclusion, if your Excellency can suggest any course of action or inquiry, I put myself at your disposal. I shall be happy to work under your directions," Paul announced.

The old man looked over the railing. He looked down the terrace. He spread out his hands again, and seemed to examine each nail separately.

"It is well to use zeal," he remarked at last, when Paul was all but driven to exasperation by this play of indifference, "none the less, if a man runs his head with force against a spiked bamboo it hurts more than if he only lays his cheek against its leaves."

"I mean to leave no stone unturned," maintained Paul stoutly, and looked defiantly into the oblique smiling eyes of his Excellency.

"Though a woman has borne you seven sons, do not trust her," was the Chinaman's next most unexpected contribution to the discussion.

Paul revolved that rapidly in his own mind. What could be the purpose of dragging in a discrediting allusion to the opposite sex? Of course, theoretically, to the Celestial, a woman *per se* is always a damaging quantity. Practically Eve is Eve, certain mutations notwithstanding, pretty well as much in Pekin as in London. But a mandarin of Chi Lung's standing would have thought it unseemly to introduce the feminine subject into a serious conversation by way of the relief of a light touch, as a Westerner might have done. There must, somehow, be a reason—some cogent reason—to justify this remark about the "little old woman" of the domestic hearth.

Paul's mind naturally flew to the woman he imagined to be most affected by Roger's trouble.

"I would stake my life on Lady de la Haye's integrity," he declared hotly.

There followed a pause.

His Excellency did not move a muscle, and yet Paul somehow felt that he was being told he had just said something particularly foolish. When next he ventured a remark, he was more wary. Chi Lung was pleased to be genial again, but vague, and as they talked on, each fencing carefully under cover of what looked like a string of aimless platitudes, Paul noticed that the conversation still seemed to be edging round to the woman of the party.

Then Paul awoke to another unexpected circumstance—the Chinaman was pumping him about Naomi Melsham—was asking his opinion.

Paul answered evasively. He had a feeling that it would be disloyal to Roger to discuss Naomi Melsham with that old man of another race who so evidently disliked her, and then, as he hesitated, the girl herself lifted the blind of the salon and stepped out.

As Paul rose, he saw that she was very distressed. Her eyes were large, strained. The peculiarly blue quality of the

iris seemed to be dimmed. The hand, which held her sunshade, trembled. The white collar, laid back on a dress of black and white blended with a curious shade of green, fluttered with her uncertain breathing.

Paul offered her his chair with a touch of genuine friendliness. Looking back on things, he always dated his participation in Naomi's life from this moment.

"You look tired," he said, "I don't suppose you slept much."

The girl nodded her head silently. She looked at the quaint figure backing against the wall. There was no sympathy there. There was such hostility, that, unnerved as she was, she swung round her head and let her eyes, with the tears so very near to them, look over the bowling-green.

His Excellency rarely addressed a woman—he considered it tax enough to reply when they spoke to him—but now he looked across at Naomi Melsham.

"You look as if your lips had tasted bitter aloes," he began maliciously.

But, before she could answer, the sound of doors opening in the salon came out distinctly on to the terrace. Both men heard, but Naomi heard also, and hers was the quicker perception.

She lifted her head, evidently listening with all her might. It was obvious that she was awaiting some great decision, and that she imagined it was on the point of being given.

To anyone who has waited for some great doctor's verdict, who has listened for the opening of a door, or for the approach of a footfall, this agony will be perfectly intelligible.

But at least, Naomi was to hear the verdict in plain, unmistakable terms, which is more than can be said of most medical pronouncements. Generally, they seem to be framed for the express purpose of adding the torture of indefiniteness to the anguish of apprehension.

Next followed a word in Roger's voice, and the girl's whole frame grew rigid.

"Does she love him so much that it hurts her like that?" Paul said to himself.

He read her apprehension one way. The old Chinaman read it another. Paul had never arrived at anything approaching a suspicion, but if he had, this would have banished it. "It is impossible that she could have had a hand in the copying of the paper, she loves him too much," he would have said to himself. It never once occurred to him that just because she did love so much, she had been driven.

Within the salon, Roger was evidently crossing the room. Sir Aylmer must have been by his side. They were talking courteously, distinctly, with that precise choice of terms which pointed to an underlying embarrassment.

Naomi looked at Paul. Her eyes asked what this fencing between the two men might portend. Did it mean that the scale had turned for Roger or against him?

Then the three watchers without heard Roger speak again. He had evidently taken up the amethyst rabbit—he was showing it to Sir Aylmer.

"That," Naomi heard him say, "is the *clou* of the collection. But if you care for such things, there are one or two other nice pieces. Will you look at them while I write out—what you require from me?"

"Thank you," returned Sir Aylmer, "I will wait here. I am sorry to hurry you, but you realize my instructions were definite."

"Yes," said Roger, "I understand. Believe me, I realize that, adopting the point of view the office evidently does, I am being treated with great consideration."

Naomi started to her feet. It was Paul who pulled her down.

"Keep still," he said, and he laid his hand on hers, "you can do nothing to help now."

Next, a door closed, the door with one panel for Autumn, and the other for Winter, leading into the Chinese Room, as the three watchers on the terrace knew. Paul made no effort to hide his agitation. He thrust his hands into his

pockets, and began to tramp the length of the terrace. Naomi could sit still no longer, she rose and leaned against the railings, her face as white as if some wound had drained it of every drop of blood.

As for the old Chinaman, he looked elated rather than cast down. For no Oriental has defeat the permanence it has for the Westerner. He who is abased today may very well be up tomorrow. Besides, life and all things in it are at the caprice of Fate. But what does appeal to nim is the enduring of these caprices with equanimity. Roger was evidently conducting himself in a way worthy of a Chinese himself.

It seemed such a little while, or was it a lifetime, and then Roger himself came through the window of the salon.

It was the first time he had seen Naomi that morning, and yet, after one quick glance, he neither looked at her nor spoke to her.

The sun had struggled out a little more fully. It was past midday and the breeze was changing to a lusty wind which swept up the terrace and promised rain itself in an hour or two.

Roger came up to Chi Lung. He stood up very straight, very tall before him.

"Your Excellency," he began, "Sir Aylmer Brent has just left Zouche. He has taken my resignation with him."

He laughed harshly and swung a glance over his shoulder at Paul—not at Naomi.

"I am a free man," he added.

The old Chinaman sat as immovable as if he were a Buddha carved out of stone.

"I am entirely my own master, now," Roger continued.

It was Paul who cried out his name, and cried it with an accent of entreaty.

"I am afraid I shall not be able to ask you to come and stay with me in Pekin again," Roger went on, addressing Marketel directly, "but I have the world before me—I can at least go where I please."

Then he moved along, and at last he looked down at Naomi.

"Perhaps you do not understand, Miss Melsham," he said, "my being allowed to resign is a consideration for my mother—and for my father's memory. All the same, I am disgraced: I am ruined, both as regards my reputation and my career."

"No! No!" protested Naomi, and she made a piteous movement with her hands.

"I ought to be thankful," continued Roger, as if he wished to lay every possible stripe on himself, "that I am not publicly turned out of the Service."

Naomi winced as though she had been struck. He saw, he must have seen the movement, and yet he went on.

"I did not expect mercy, and you may be sure I shall not ask for it. If I had been guilty I should have deserved none. I am innocent, but not one person in a hundred will believe that; appearances being so against me, I shall not resent it if my oldest friend—or my dearest friend—passes me by, until I can prove my innocence."

He turned about as he said that. He had marked out his own position. He had released them all—even the woman he loved—from any obligation. He began to go down the terrace. Paul looked after him.

"Where are you going, Roger?" he cried.

His voice rose and fell in the air. It spent itself uselessly. It was then Marketel turned to Naomi, but she did not require his prompting.

"Roger," she breathed, "Roger."

He heard her, though her tone had hardly been more than a whisper. He turned on her as if her pity lowered him.

"Don't pity me," he groaned out, "I will not be pitied, I cannot bear to be pitied."

Marketel sprang after him, but Roger shook him off.

"Are you afraid that I shall blow my brains out?" he demanded brutally.

Naomi moved away from the railings this time. She

threw up her head. The light came back to her eyes, the color to her cheeks. Her face lost its pinched look, and Marketel, watching, thought he had not believed that even her beauty could be so beautiful.

"Stop," she cried, and for very amazement at the authority in her tone, Roger stood still.

"Come back," she ordered, with the same imperative ring.

Roger hesitated, he looked before him, he swayed, he moved round, and then he began to stumble back as if drawn by that which was stronger than his will or his determination.

Naomi went to meet him, she advanced swiftly, and held out her hands.

"Roger, have you forgotten that I am to count with you now?" she demanded.

Paul heard the words, and a lump came into his throat. There was but one woman in the world for him, and would she ever identify herself with his life in such a tone?

"You don't understand, you can't understand," Roger began unsteadily.

"Not understand," cried back Naomi, "it is you who do not understand. It is you who will not see: who do not hear."

She held out her hands again. It is doubtful if she so much as remembered that there were spectators. Anyway, they did not count. This was between her and the man looking at her with a drawn face and darkened eyes.

The wind scurried noisily along the terrace. The poplars in the park drove their agitated heads first to left and then to right. The noise of countless branches, of every leaf on every tree swaying this way and that, came up like the roar of a mighty sea beating on a sandy shore.

"You must speak," Naomi decreed. "Roger, don't you see that you must speak now: that you must tell his Excellency and Mr. Marketel what you said to me yesterday—what I answered you?"

Roger shook his head.

"Yesterday was different," he muttered dully.

"There is no difference between yesterday and today as far as you and I are concerned," the girl cried back. "You and I have nothing to do with times and seasons. What I said to you yesterday holds good today: what I was yesterday, I am today."

"Your Excellency," she hurried on, appealing to the man who she knew was the most hostile to her, forcing him, just because he did dislike her, to range himself on her side, "if Roger will not tell you, I will. If Roger hesitates, I glory in it. Hear me, and you, too, Mr. Marketel. Yesterday Roger asked me to be his wife. Today, I claim that right. I claim the right to give myself to him, to be called by his name, to stand by him, to love him as he loves me."

She fell back trembling, and then her weakness, for she choked and stumbled, did what even her appeal had failed to do, it broke down Roger's stony aloofness. He darted forward, threw out his arms, and caught Naomi.

"My . . . my wife," he stuttered.

"Your wife, Roger," answered Naomi Melsham.

Paul Marketel walked over to the old Chinaman and quite peremptorily he rapped the lean old shoulder.

"Your Excellency," he said, "neither you nor I are wanted here."

He turned and hurried to the steps down to the bowling-green. He heard the shuffling tread behind him, but, just before he reached the steps, the small door from the house opened and Lady de la Haye came out.

A less brave woman would have pleaded that everlasting feminine help in trouble—a headache—and retired to a darkened room with a bottle of smelling salts. Courage had always been one of Amabelle's most consistent qualities. The burden was to be borne, so she would shoulder it at once. Besides, there was Roger to think of, perhaps to help in a double trouble.

Lady de la Haye had by no means determined in her own mind what Naomi would do. For all she knew, Roger might find himself abandoned, as well as disgraced.

Naomi Melsham saw the tall, white-haired woman coming along. She hastened to meet her.

"Your Excellency—Mr. Marketel," she said, "don't go for a minute." Then she turned to Roger's mother. "Lady de la Haye," she said, "Roger and I are going to be married immediately."

CHAPTER XIV

Naomi's announcement was so decisive, it closed one phase of the question with such an unarguable assertion, that for quite a few moments not only was there no further word to say, but equally no movement was possible.

Then Paul touched the old Chinaman on the shoulder.

"Your Excellency," he said, "we are not wanted here."

His tone was so imperative that Chi Lung followed him through the window of the salon, with nothing more aggressive than a throwing back of the old chin, and an additional strut of the slow walk.

As for Amabelle, she looked dumbly at her son, and then at the girl who had so courageously identified herself with him. If either of them had so much as glanced at her, she must have held out her arms, but they were each absorbed in the other. There was no joyousness in their eyes, none of the rapture of a great abandonment. Roger's head was hanging down as if he were stunned. Naomi was waiting for his next words. The one thing which marked how the man felt was the twitching fingers entwined within the girl's fingers.

So, standing thus, Amabelle left them.

She went back into the house, back to the everyday duties of a hostess, for the week-end party was breaking up—in a very different spirit, alas, from the cheerful one in which they had gathered at Zouche only four days previously. There were the constrained adieux of her guests to receive, and their discomfiture and uneasiness to be tactfully ignored or softened, as each individual case required.

Victoria was taking Aimée with her,—an inspiration which Amabelle recognized gratefully but mutely,—Victoria could always be relied on to do the helpful, kindly things of life in such a delicate whispered way, that to give them

recognition in mere words would seem to impair their fragrance. She attempted no awkwardly phrased words of comfort to her hostess, but her look and manner were a soothing balm to the aching heart of the mother.

Armand de Rochecorbon was motoring up to Scotland on a round of country house visits, so no one could take advantage of his offer to accommodate all or any in his Panhard. He was singularly terse as he took leave of Amabelle, but she knew that he was among the most loyal and steadfast of Roger's friends.

"Any time—anywhere—even from Pekin to Timbuctoo —Roger has but to lift the little finger for me and I come." These were his final words, which could but leave her wanly smiling, though she was fully assured of their sincerity.

Billy Hirst was the next to come to say good-by. There was nothing he could do to help Roger if he lingered, as he explained ruefully. He had received a letter that morning about a new expedition on business lines, with a paid personnel, which was being organized in London. Being poor now, he felt it was an opportunity not to be neglected. Then as he saw the endurance on Amabelle's face, he was moved to say the first thing which came into his head.

"It's all nonsense," he told her, "you'll see—everything will be found out before the week is up. The thief will be in custody and Roger cleared."

The sanguine forecast cheered her, though she knew too much about international intricacies to hope that it would turn out to be more than a forecast.

But, when Chi Lung came to say farewell, he left her disturbed and dismayed. His mask of impassivity was at its most impregnable. He seemed to counsel delay, procrastination, and when she protested that every moment lived under the disgrace was a moment filched from Roger's happiness, the old man merely replied with one of his Celestial proverbs.

"Much gold," he muttered, "many bolts. Many peacocks —more jays. Yet, when youth takes the scorpion for a bedfellow, the aged go out on the roof."

Lady de la Haye was still pondering that cryptic saying when Paul sought her out.

"I am taking Roger up to Town with me," he said. She looked up with a sharp surprise, but he went on quickly—"I want to tell you before I leave that what a man can do to discover the real thief, I will."

Amabelle looked sadly at him. Everyone was so zealous to help, but zeal without knowledge would avail nothing.

Stay—was everyone eager to help? She thought of her old friend—of the Celestial counsel of inertia—and she was perhaps going to say a word about this to Paul when Littleport entered.

"I think, sir," the old man said, "that you ought to have this at once." He held out a thin strip of red paper on the big presentation salver.

"What is it?" Paul asked quickly.

"From his Excellency, sir," Littleport returned.

"From his Excellency," Lady de la Haye echoed.

She turned with a sudden swift motion of gladness to Paul. Marketel had the strip of thin red paper in his hand.

"Only his Excellency's visiting card," he said, as if annoyed that such a toy of ceremony should be obtruded on him at such a moment.

Amabelle was quicker than he was. She guessed instantly that it was one of the queer, devious modes of communication dear to a Celestial.

She took the card from Paul. The two symbols of his Excellency's name and rank were printed in proper Celestial fashion one above the other, but at the very foot was added, in the thin writing which Chi Lung affected when he condescended to European penmanship, the address of the old man's house in London.

"No. 19 Portarlington Place," she exclaimed, showing the addition to Paul. "Don't you understand, he means you to go and see him. Oh, Paul, what if he should be inviting you to help him to clear Roger!" She waited a moment, turning that over in her mind. Paul watched her—silent—puzzled.

"Why couldn't the old man have said straight out if he wanted me?" he asked.

"Because he is a Celestial," Amabelle answered.

"Of course you understand them and their queer circumlocutory ways," Paul grunted irritably—"you had fourteen years of their oddities with Sir Arthur at Pekin."

Lady de la Haye nodded with a subdued sigh. "Yes, it needs patience, Paul, I know," she said. "The Chinese mind often appears to proceed backwards because it works from motives unexpected by our Western mind, and is directed to an end equally unforeseen by us; it's a sort of mental jiu-jitsu!"

Paul shook his head—"I call it procrastination," he rejoined stubbornly. "I very nearly lost my temper with the old man this morning—he was so confoundedly Oriental—and yet—" he paused and a smile crept round the corners of his mouth—"I like the old boy—and I'm sure you're right about his devotion to Roger. But then, why doesn't he move to help us?" Paul's irritation was coming uppermost again. "He can," he continued emphatically, "I'm sure of that—he knows a lot more than he confides to us—but why? It's a puzzle. Ha!" Paul's face lighted up humorously—"that's it," he went on—"'A Chinese Puzzle'—and we've got to discover the master spring for ourselves, I suppose."

Amabelle looked up at him curiously.

"Don't you remember," he hastened to explain, "those irritating toys we used to have when we were children? There was a box they called 'The Chinese Puzzle'—perfectly square, perfectly smooth—to all outward appearances perfectly solid—you could hammer it or batter it, and it wouldn't open in a month of Sundays, but, put your finger by chance on the right spring—hey, presto!—all the sides in that blessed box revolved at once, showing daylight through."

He paused—Amabelle was watching him intently—a curious wonder growing in her eyes.

"And you think——" she said slowly.

"Old Chi Lung's the same sort of 'Chinese Puzzle,'" Paul retorted, "solid, stolid, all sharp corners, smooth as paint and dark as wood, but somewhere there's a hidden spring, and if we can only put our finger on it—we shall come to daylight over this business of Roger's."

Lady de la Haye smiled gently—"You may be right, Paul," she agreed, "but if Chi Lung really holds the spring to this mystery, only patience to the infinite degree will serve with him."

"I'll be a very monument of patience to the old man," Paul declared resolutely, "I'll out-Job Job at the business—trust to me!" He carefully deposited the old Chinaman's red visiting card in his note case. "This is the winning suit," he concluded confidently, "I see that now, and some day the old man will draw the trump card from that long sleeve of his."

Paul left her cheered somewhat—stimulated to think that her old friend had but appeared lukewarm while all the time he was meditating a movement to help. And then Roger sought her out, and with her first glance at his face she was plunged back into the stress of the actual situation.

"I am going away," he began abruptly, "up to London with Paul—I am leaving in an hour."

Most women would have asked why. Amabelle did nothing of the kind. She sat still and waited. All her life that power of silence had brought her revelation. The woman who leaves a man free to tell her nothing, invariably ends by hearing all.

"Don't you see," Roger blurted out, "that I have no right to take advantage of Naomi's generosity? She was so moved by my trouble that she thought of nothing but helping me, but it isn't fair to her—I must go away. I must leave her to reflect, to weigh things, to add them up. A man damned as I am has no right to drag a woman down with him."

Almost timidly his mother spoke of rehabilitation, of restitution. Roger was not in a condition which admitted of argument. He held on to one point. He must go away to give Naomi a chance to repent of her generosity.

"I have left her a letter," he said, "telling her that what was said this morning counts for nothing. I shall stay with Paul for a day or two till I can decide on my next movements. I'll wire you tomorrow, dearest."

Amabelle de la Haye assented without even a murmur of protest. As she reviewed the circumstances, she realized that Roger was doing the only thing possible to a man with as fine a sense of honor, with as delicate a set of scruples, as his. All his life she had come to his rescue, not when he called, but before he called, and now her first impulse was to set about thinking what she could do to help. But another moment's reflection pointed out that the initiative had passed from her—Naomi was Roger's first consideration, and his stumbling-block. It was for her to protest or acquiesce. She must prove whether her passionate declaration of the morning was a resolution, a principle, or whether it was but an outburst of overwrought feeling. Yet, Amabelle would still be at hand if she were wanted. She was too fine a woman to refuse a rôle because it did not happen to be the "lead."

She retired to the Queen Anne room and told Littleport that she was not at home, but if anyone wanted her she was to be found there—a hint which she could trust the old man to interpret with discretion.

Meantime the car, with Paul driving and Roger sitting beside him, was racing up to London. At first the two men sat side by side in silence: nothing had been arranged beyond the bare fact that Roger would go back to stay with Paul. There had been no mention as yet of plans or purpose, but when Paul's big car had been covering the ground for some half-hour at a pace which would have routed the hero of a police-trap, Roger suddenly turned on him.

"It was the Olympic News Service who issued our memorandum to the papers," he said tersely.

Paul nodded. Roger's mind had passed from Naomi to the theft. As long as Roger had been absorbed in the intimately personal matter, Marketel had felt that the greatest service he could do his friend was to keep still. Now, he

felt that he could at least contribute his comment to other comments.

"The Olympic News Service is Lionel Vancrest," he said, "a hustler, but straight."

"He must have got it direct from the thief?" Roger went on.

"Bought it," corrected Paul, "and for a pretty stiff figure too, I imagine."

"At any rate," replied Roger testily, "he would know who the fellow was."

Paul nodded. He was upon an awkward piece of road and for the moment the wheel absorbed him.

"Look here," said Roger, "why shouldn't we go straight to the Olympic people and see what we can find out from them?"

"Just what I'd suggest myself," Paul answered.

"Do you know where they are?"

"Oh, yes," said Paul, "I know."

Roger nodded and lapsed into silence again. His brow was wrinkled, his lips were shut in a firm, obtruded line.

Paul drove on with even less regard to the speed limit than before, but man proposes and machinery disposes. The car, which had carried Paul hundreds of miles when nothing more momentous than a dinner engagement was at stake, suddenly grunted, groaned, slowed down, and then refused to move a yard. In vain Paul got out, opened the bonnet, and inspected first one item of the machinery and then the other—nothing would make the motor move, and it was not until a farm cart passed and was hired to tow them to the nearest town that Paul and Roger saw any chance of getting to London that night. As it was, they did not reach Liverpool Street Station until after nine and the Olympic News Agency was closed. There was nothing for it but to possess their souls with what patience they could until the morrow.

The Olympic Press Agency was an international concern, perhaps that was why it housed itself with comparative

modesty. The next morning before eleven, Paul pulled up at the dingy door of the old house, and with only a wave of his hand to indicate that Roger was to follow him, mounted the steps.

Diplomats—officially anyway—are not supposed to have anything to do with press bureaus—financiers admittedly have. Paul pushed his way into the outer office.

"Is Mr. Vancrest upstairs?" he asked.

A young man looked at him superciliously, debating whether to say that his principal was out, or that he would go and see if Mr. Vancrest were at home, but Paul pushed his card over the table.

"Take that up, please," he said, "and say that my business is immediate."

The youth only glanced once at the card and then his whole manner changed.

"Yes, sir—certainly, sir," he said, as deferential as he had been previously offhand.

Paul watched the youth out of the room.

"Lucky to catch him so early," he murmured, but Roger only gave him back a glance. So much hung on this interview, or he hoped it might, that he could not trust himself to speak.

The two men had only time for another glance and then the clerk came back. He was as deferential as before, but somewhat less eager. Paul marked the difference at once—"Vancrest doesn't want to see us," he concluded, "he'd have said he was out if he had dared."

But Roger was already out of the room, he was already going up the narrow stairs. Paul followed him, thinking as deeply as quickly.

The clerk pushed open the door.

"Mr. Marketel," he announced, "and," put in Roger, "Sir Roger de la Haye."

Paul heard the announcement and great as was his partiality for straight dealing, he was dismayed, not to say vexed. Roger had unmasked the purpose of their visit, had flung down his gauntlet with a vengeance.

A shade passed over the fair face of the man sitting behind a big desk. It was Lionel Vancrest himself, the man who, from a mere clerk living on a few shillings a week, had managed to raise himself to the position of the most celebrated interchanger of news in the whole world.

Paul had just time to catch a glimpse of the swift change in Vancrest's face, and then the little man rose.

"I am always pleased to see Mr. Marketel," he said, extending his hand, "but this is the first time that I have had the pleasure of meeting Sir Roger de la Haye."

He moved out from his desk as he spoke and indicated a couple of chairs. He took a box of cigars from the side-table.

"A Havana—and a whisky and soda," he suggested, as if this could but be a visit of pleasant social gossip. But Roger de la Haye would have nothing to do with social amenities, neither would he beat around the bush.

"Mr. Vancrest," he said, "I insisted on Mr. Marketel's bringing me here."

The little stout man murmured something about it's being a pleasure to meet any friend of Mr. Marketel's, but the pale eyes were looking out with a searching glance, and the blue of their iris had become as hard as stone.

Roger came a step nearer.

"We have come to know the name of the scoundrel who sold the copy of the Chinese memorandum to you."

Vancrest smiled tolerantly—"I'm sorry, Sir Roger," he said, "it was a private transaction between me—and the individual in question."

"You bought stolen property," Roger flung back at him.

"Stolen?" echoed Vancrest. "I certainly cannot admit that. If the—er—the information was stolen, I had no notion of how it was obtained when I bought it. In any case," and he smiled again at them, "it is not my business to inquire as to origins, but to acquire facts of public interest and utility—facts, moreover, whose genuineness even you are not prepared to deny." He gave a quick shrewd glance at Marketel as he spoke.

"But," objected Roger, "this Chinese loan was a confidential negotiation."

"And therefore of particular value to the world at large." This time the mouth under the fair mustache curved in a cynical smile. "That is what my Agency exists for—to diffuse such exclusive information—in the public interest."

Roger made a weary gesture. He had no time to fence—no patience with subtleties.

"Mr. Vancrest," he said, "this matter is vitally serious. The name, please, of the man from whom you bought the Chinese memorandum."

"My dear sir," rejoined Vancrest, with a deprecating movement. He turned to Paul.

"You know," he said, as if he could still hope for reasonableness from him, though he despaired of finding it with Roger, "that the essence of my business is confidence—whatever news comes to me is given on a basis of confidence."

"Do you mean," thrust in Roger, "that you refuse to tell us the fellow's name?"

"I mean," returned Vancrest blandly, "that it is impossible for me to do so." He looked at Paul again. "The success of my Agency depends on the amount of confidence I inspire. I have established a reputation for loyalty to my agents."

"But," said Paul, "in this instance——"

Mr. Vancrest shook his head.

"There can be no exceptions, Mr. Marketel," he said.

"Good God, man," thrust in Roger passionately, "don't you understand what this means to me? *I* am being saddled with the responsibility of this betrayal—until I can clear myself by exposing the real thief, my career is ruined, my reputation tainted. Can you sit there calmly and see an innocent man bear the culpability for another's crime?"

Vancrest leaned forward seriously. There was a touch of genuine sympathy in his voice as he spoke.

"I am sorry, Sir Roger," he said, "I had no idea that the matter affected you so badly—none the less——" He

paused, and his perturbation was quite obviously sincere, "I have given my word, and——" he filled in the break with a significant shrug.

"But," urged Roger desperately, "the man is a common thief."

Vancrest shook his head with a protesting smile. "No, Sir Roger," he differed, "not a common one, unfortunately for you—he is a most acute one. He got wind of the transaction and brought me details of what he averred to be the terms of a secret navy loan to China. If the information was correct, it was a scoop of such magnitude that it was worth risking a good deal. I took that risk. The terms were correct. I paid heavily and promised secrecy. It must be evident to both you gentlemen," and here the little man permitted himself half a bow, "that wherever my sympathies may be, my tongue is tied."

Paul saw that Vancrest was immovable, as indeed he knew he was obliged to be, and Roger saw it too. There was no point in their staying longer. He cut short the interview.

"I warn you, Mr. Vancrest," he said, "the matter will not end here, we shall leave no stone unturned to find the thief."

The little man smiled genially and with a carefully noncommittal air, and then an impulse superseded the business attitude. "I hope you may succeed," he said. "Indeed," he went on, turning more directly to Roger, "it would give me genuine satisfaction to know that you had run the—ahem—individual in question to earth—but, my hands are tied."

Roger bowed stiffly and followed Paul down the stairs without a word. Pious hopes were all very well, but he wanted exact information, and this man who could have named the thief refused to speak.

They were no sooner in the street than his passion found voice again. He turned on the big man at his side.

"Do you think I am going to be satisfied with what Vancrest said? Do you think I am going to do nothing more?"

he asked, and Paul might have retorted that he had stated no supposition at all, but he had too keen a perception of how Roger was suffering to say anything so thoughtless, and all he returned was that if Roger had any lead to suggest, he asked nothing better than to follow.

For a moment that threw Roger back on himself.

"You must know of something, you must be able to do something," he muttered peevishly, and then, almost as he spoke, he clutched Paul's arm.

"There's Carson," he declared.

"Who is Carson?" asked Marketel.

Roger rapidly explained. Harold Carson was a man sometimes employed by the Foreign Office, at other times he worked for private individuals—if he considered the case worthy of his time and attention. He had set what might be called a high standard in espionage, he would give no help to mere intrigue, still less to anything remotely connected with blackmail. He was a man to be trusted, a man of acumen and of delicate touch.

"I should think he is the very man for us," Paul concluded when he had heard Roger's description. "Where does he live?"

For a moment Roger was in doubt, then he recollected that Harold Carson's address was in the telephone book, and the mention of the telephone suggested the ringing up of the detective and the asking of him if he could see them at once.

Roger and Marketel drove to Paul's club—but once at the door, Roger would not get out. He fancied that a man whom he knew slightly had seen who was in the car and had hurried up the steps to avoid him. No doubt the affair was already club gossip. "Go in and telephone," he said grimly to Paul, "I'll wait here."

He drew further back in the car and peeped out sideways. He looked at the wide steps—into the fine hall. He saw the members coming and going: the little knots form and disperse: he could see the emphatic gestures, could imagine the decisive words clothing decisive opinions which they

accompanied. He saw more than one head turn to look after Paul. Was opinion pitying Paul and saying hard things of him too?

Before Paul returned, Roger had worked himself up to a pitch of misery.

"Carson won't be at home until three," Paul said as he put his hand on to the door.

"Then we'll go at three," Roger said shortly.

"Right," answered Paul. He stood hesitating a moment. If he were in doubt as to what was to come next, Roger solved the problem.

"I shall go to my lawyer," he said. "May I take the car on? I shall be leaving England almost immediately and I must leave my mother a power of attorney."

Paul nodded quickly with a relieved smile. "Just suit me," he said, "I feel like a walk to pull my wits together. Be at my house for lunch and we'll go together to see Carson."

From the quiet club in St. James's Square to Paul's house, it was almost a direct way to go by Egglestone Place, in which particular street Victoria rented a little house with a white painted door and flowers in the window-boxes. Paul would have liked to maintain that to go past that little house was the most direct way for him, but he was too honest to juggle with himself.

He was as much a man as a devoted friend, and now, having done all for his friend, the thought of Victoria took precedence, for the moment, of that perplexity.

When Victoria left Zouche the previous day, she had taken Aimée with her. She had referred vaguely to remaining in London for a few days and then going "somewhere." In reality she intended to put the Channel between herself and this masterful man.

Perhaps when Paul set forth he had only meant to go past Victoria's dwelling, to imagine her within and pass by, but when he reached the point where Egglestone Gardens turned into Egglestone Place, he pulled up.

The attraction of gravitation is a feeble thing compared with the attraction of desire. Paul looked down the street toward No. 19, much as Moses must have looked down on the Promised Land, and then he saw a taxicab come along from the opposite end of the street. That cab drew up before Victoria's door, and Paul could see it was Billy Hirst who got out and ran up the steps to the house.

The whole of Paul's frame stiffened—and with anger. It was quite unreasonable, of course, but it set every fiber of his being protesting, tingling, to think that Billy could claim admittance as a matter of course, while he was casting about for an excuse to pull the bell.

The next moment the plain strong face relaxed into an ironical smile. After all Billy's luck was not so very much better than his own, for Victoria's Emily, as she was always known to the intimate friends of the house, was shaking her head with an evident denial.

He started off down the street to accost Billy.

"Well, I never," began the young man. "I never thought I'd run across you."

The two turned side by side.

"I say," ran on Billy, "this is luck my seeing you. I suppose you can tell me no end."

"What about?"

"About prospecting in the Andes. It was just coming into my head to ring you up."

"What do you want to know about it?" inquired Paul shortly.

"I've got the definite offer of a job there."

"With whom?" asked Paul.

"Oh," answered Billy vaguely, "under some Brazilian fellows."

Paul turned and faced the gay light-hearted boy almost angrily. "I suppose you know what a business expedition into the Andes under a half-breed may mean?" he asked.

"Worry, fever, risk—but pay," retorted Billy.

"I've worked in such company," Paul went on, and he spoke slowly. "I've tried it in Mexico, I've tried it else-

where. I know these exploring expeditions, and it isn't a life fit for a dog."

"Beggars can't be choosers," answered Billy, and for once he came very near to being sulky.

"Surely," cried out Paul, "you can find something better?"

At that very moment, as if Dame Fate herself would answer the question, a newsboy raced past them. "Perilous position of the Antarctic Expedition," he was crying—"Relief ship to sail."

Marketel pointed towards the flaming poster. "Didn't Victoria tell me you were going to have a hand in that?" he said, "surely that's more in your line."

"It was—I'd never done the Arctics, and of course that's just a Sunday picnic—but I can't raise the needful."

"It's a question of money?"

Billy shuffled uncomfortably. "You see," he said, "a month ago I offered to put two thousand into the job, but I can't now. Anyhow, that Andes job will bring me in a bit whatever else is to be said against it."

After that the two men walked along silently side by side.

Paul told himself that this expedition to the Andes was not his affair, either to encourage or withhold. He had done his duty in refusing Billy the command of his ruby expedition. The remembrance of David and Uriah the Hittite had made him search his mind to its depths. "We are none of us so good or so bad as we think we are," remarked that wise old cynic, La Rochefoucauld, and Paul's sensitiveness probably exaggerated the savagery of his desire. Now he had fought out the fight with himself and he had won. No act or aid of his should send his rival into a possible danger from which he might never return. Surely there his duty finished? And now if this madman chose to go to the Andes, what earthly concern was it of his?

Paul smiled grimly under his mustache. That qualifying adjective "earthly" restored the balance of his perspective. There is so much that is earthly about this process of reasoning which, be it marked, men only employ when there is

some advantage to themselves behind it. Paul could not hide the possible advantage to himself in this situation unless he were content to deliberately shut his eyes to it. His own ruby expedition had a necessary element of danger to it, but the present scheme was a hundred times worse. Paul doubted if Billy, with all his experience, really estimated what was before him. The young man had traveled often enough where the comforts of life were non-existent, but he had always been in command, it had always been a white man's job. The bearers had been his, the porters, the escort. His, too, was the command of the stores, the comforts, the medicines. The expedition was conducted on the lines of an honorable man's conception of fair dealing. Now, Billy proposed to go as a paid servant in a gang where every man was for himself and, ten to one, such things as honor and scrupulousness would be conspicuous by their absence. Billy would never stand it, would never keep a quiet tongue in his head. Then, once down with fever (and the fever was pretty well as certain as that night followed day), it might be convenient to get rid of him. Billy might be left to die in some jungle—or if there seemed a greater need to hurry, a knife might just be thrust between his ribs. Paul shut off this ugly picture with a jerk.

"When do you think of starting?" he asked.

"If I go, I sign on today," Billy answered. "They are to let me know by five this evening."

"And," asked Paul, "is Victoria willing that you should go?"

"She does not know anything about it. I'd just been to try to see her when I met you."

Paul nodded. The "am I my brother's keeper?" argument had been finally thrust behind him—few honest men find it easy to give it a conscientious negative.

"Yes—you ought not to decide until you have seen her," Paul answered weightily.

He turned suddenly and held out his hand.

"Good-by, Hirst," he said, "and good luck to you whatever you decide."

He hesitated a moment. It seemed as if he were about to say something further, to add some word of advice, but instead, with a short laugh, he swung on his heel and walked rapidly away.

Billy stared after him curiously, with a kind of feeling that the really important thing had been left unsaid.

"Queer old bird, Marketel," he commented and sauntered off to fill in the couple of hours to lunch time, after which he proposed to again present himself at Egglestone Place.

As Paul Marketel walked rapidly away, he was revolving a host of possibilities in his mind. He looked at his watch —it was not yet twelve o'clock. He hailed a passing taxi and directed the man to drive at once to his bank. His business was of the briefest, for by the time the bank manager had hurried round to see personally what he could do for so distinguished a client, Paul had turned over a hastily written check to the cashier and had received in exchange two large new bank notes of the unusual value of one thousand pounds each.

In less than ten minutes he was back in the library of his own big lonely house inscribing a few typewritten words on a blank half-sheet of paper. An envelope was duly addressed in the same fashion, and an express messenger boy waiting at the door was given particular instructions as to when and where he was to deliver it.

The business completed, Paul lighted a big cigar, dropped his bulky frame into a chair, and resolutely devoted himself to a fresh review of the mystery of the Chinese memorandum.

CHAPTER XV

It was nearly three o'clock when Billy Hirst knocked again at the door of 19 Egglestone Place.

"No, Sir," answered Emily, "Miss Cresswell has not yet come back, but she may return at any moment. Won't you come in?"

Billy said he would, and as he was putting down his hat and stick, Emily told him that Aimée was in the drawing-room. Billy grunted discontentedly. He was fond enough of Aimée in his way, but at that moment he wanted to see Victoria by herself.

As a rule, Billy had not a great deal to say to the woman he was going to marry—some time—but Paul's questions as to what Victoria would think had struck home. It was right she should know what this Brazilian expedition implied: it was right too she should say her yea or nay. Hitherto she had always met his wandering fits cheerfully and with acquiescence, but this was rather different, inasmuch as if he made any money out of it—a thing about which he had been quite indifferent before—he wanted to put it into a farm or a ranch. He must earn his own living, and the colonies, not an office stool, seemed to him the only way.

He walked up the stairs soberly for him, and pushed open the door of Victoria's pretty drawing-room. He was too much an habitué for Emily to announce him, and as he sank on to a big easy chair and stretched out his legs —for to elongate his lower limbs always seems to console a man when he is perturbed—he thought he had the room all to himself, and then the window curtains were pushed aside and he saw Aimée.

"You?" she began.

Billy assured her that he was he himself.

"Will Victoria be long?" he asked.

"Couldn't say," Aimée answered as she curled herself up kitten fashion among the sofa cushions.

"I want to see her," murmured Billy.

"Anything particular?" asked the girl.

Billy nodded and then he got up and walked down the room.

There was nothing extravagant or lavish about Victoria's possessions. She had kept the very things which Aunt Martha—whose taste was of the horse-hair period—had mostly banished to the attics, but since they were none of them less than a hundred years old, they at least bespoke a settled and ordered life.

Two days ago Billy would have dismissed the whole of the drawing-room furniture as "Aunt Martha's odds and ends," now he looked at them from quite another point of view. To think of Victoria's living in a house like this was a very different matter from imagining Victoria's being transplanted into a wooden shanty. Not that she would hesitate if it were worth while, but the question was—was it worth while—was he worth while?

Aimée watched him, and then suddenly she sat up. She hunched up her knees until they touched her chin, and clasped both her hands about them.

"I say, Billy," she began.

"What?" he asked shortly.

"I suppose you think I am only a child," she went on.

"No—betwixt and between," returned the young man judicially.

"And you consider yourself grown-up?"

"If I'm not I never shall be," Billy answered.

Aimée nodded. She had a long chain of pink coral round her neck, and she lifted one end and began to pass the beads one by one through her fingers. She looked so demure—her air was so reflective—that it even conveyed something to Billy.

"Look here! What are you driving at?" he demanded.

"I suppose," remarked the girl, "minding your own business is a virtue?"

"I should say so, just," returned the young man.

"And Victoria's business could not be mine?"

"Don't see how it could be."

"You think she can manage her own affairs?"

"No one better."

"She did take her money away from that Mr. Buzby," pursued Aimée reflectively.

"No," cried out Billy, falling into the particular trap prepared for him, "she didn't—Paul Marketel took it for her."

"Oh!" murmured Aimée.

Billy turned on her.

"I say," he cried out irritably, "what do you mean by saying 'oh' like that?"

The girl's lips were skimmed with a smile. It was tender and amused at the same time. A very little smile—such a one, in fact, as even the youngest girl permits herself when faced by a display of masculine denseness.

"I'm no good at beating about the bush," declared Billy, as he caught the fleeting expression, "but I don't like being made a fool of."

Aimée rose too. It was wonderful how a certain largeness of purpose pushed the childishness out of her face.

"Don't you see," she cried out, "I'm taking no end on myself. Perhaps I'm saying what I ought not, but you are making such a mistake."

"What mistake?" asked Billy, "let's have it out plain."

Aimée straightened her slip of a body. She put her hands demurely down to her sides. She felt as if she were back in the convent. She almost expected to hear the Mother Superior's weighty "*ma fille,*" and then she raised her head. Whatever scrapes she got into she had never been frightened when it came to the exaction of the penalty—she was not going to be frightened now.

"Billy," she said, "you are not in love with Victoria."

The young man stiffened. It was pretty much what he

had been coming to ever since he knew that his money had gone, but to whisper a thing like that in his own heart was a very different thing from hearing it proclaimed in the open by another person.

"You have no right to say that," he retorted.

"Have you ever asked yourself," Aimée went on so quickly that Billy had no time to interrupt her, "if Victoria is in love with you?"

"Victoria?" exclaimed Billy. His first notion was to say that of course she must be—were they not going to be married—some day—had they not been engaged for years? Instead, he stopped with his mouth half open.

"Have you ever noticed her with Paul Marketel?" Aimée said softly.

"Paul? What on earth has he got to do with us?" asked Billy.

"Everything," was the astonishing response.

Billy Hirst turned slowly round. The easy-going expression had left his face, and its place had been taken by that look of fixed determination which explained how he came to be an efficient leader under trying circumstances.

"I say, Aimée," he said, "you have said either too much or too little. Please tell me exactly what you mean."

"I mean," returned Aimée, "that Paul Marketel is in love with Victoria, and Victoria with him."

"My hat!" ejaculated Billy.

He stood still, staring straight before him, then he whistled a long low note.

Some statements strike one as possibly correct—others as possibly incorrect, they require time for examination, time to determine what value to attach to them. Here and there an assertion comes home with a rush of conviction.

As Billy heard Aimée's bald announcement, there was that, somewhere in the background of his mind, which answered "this is true."

He stood still, thinking backwards, and out of a confusion of thought Marketel's attitude detached itself.

"I see," he muttered, "why Paul wouldn't let me go on that ruby hunt."

"Tell me all about it," Aimée demanded

In a very few words Billy sketched the position, and then Aimée put Paul's exact conclusion into her own words.

"I suppose," she said, "that since you were so badly in his way, it wasn't playing the game to let you run a chance of getting out of it."

And then just as matters had got to this point, Victoria herself pushed open the door.

She had evidently only just come in, but in her hand she held a letter.

"This came round from your rooms," she said, holding the envelope out to Billy. "It was marked 'immediate,' and seemed so important that the messenger was sent on here."

"Right," said Billy. He took the long business-looking envelope into his hand and glanced at Victoria. He was quite sure it was some further word about the Brazilian business. He had expected it and had told his landlady to send it on to Victoria's house. He wished he had had a chance of saying a word before it came, but as it was here, he broke the seal. He pushed up the flap, took out a large sheet and unfolded it.

"Oh!" he began blankly, and then he gave vent to such a peculiar sound—a gasp—a smothered exclamation—that both the women looked up quickly.

"What is it?" Aimée asked.

"Money," gasped Billy, "two thousand pounds."

He let the envelope flutter out of his grasp. The sheet of notepaper followed, but in his hand he kept two Bank of England notes.

He thrust out his arm and pushed the money closer to Victoria.

"Do you see?" he demanded hoarsely, fluttering first one note and then the other, "one thousand pounds—one thousand pounds. What the deuce does it mean?"

Victoria picked up the paper which had fallen on the hearthrug. "Surely," she said, "the letter will explain."

He took it from her quickly and unfolded the single sheet. Five words were written on it and he read them hastily—"A reparation and a restitution," he repeated.

For one moment he looked completely mystified, then his face lighted up with a very boyish glee. "By Jove," he exclaimed, "good old Buzby!"

"Buzby?" echoed Victoria. "Edward Buzby—what has Edward Buzby to do with this?"

"He must have sent it," Billy ran on impetuously. He looked from her to Aimée.

"Don't you see," he explained. "It's as clear as daylight. This restitution is from Buzby. He's sent me back £2,000—first instalment of my own money. It's as I said," Billy went on, and he threw back his head as though defying anyone to disagree with him. "The poor chap wasn't a wrong 'un. It's only that he was overdriven and something gave way a bit. I suppose now, when he's steadied down and had time to remember what's what, he's started to set things right again."

"I wonder," returned Victoria, "if you are right."

"Who'd send it if Buzby didn't?" Billy demanded. "Folks don't put £2,000 into an envelope for the pleasure of licking up the flap. Now do they?" he concluded aggressively.

Victoria could only shake her head, and Billy went on joyfully to say that "Brazil might take care of itself—he'd go on the Antarctic." That, of course, entailed an explanation, but it didn't take Victoria long to learn the details of the Brazilian scheme and how Paul Marketel had opposed it.

"Paul," she said, fastening on that, "Paul advised you against it?"

"Yes," answered Billy. He looked significantly at Aimée and the girl required no further hint. She left him with Victoria, and Billy looked at the door for quite

a moment after it was closed. Then he straightened himself.

"I'm a selfish pig," he began. "Buzby's sending back that money put everything else clean out of my head, but I want to ask you a question, Victoria."

"What question?" she faltered.

He looked at her very straight.

"Would you mind telling me," he asked, "is there anyone you like better than me?"

"Oh! Billy," she cried back, "what made you say that? Who has been telling you?"

He came up to her and took her hand.

"No one has told me as much as you yourself have now," he said.

She hung her head and he looked down at her with a very tender yet far-detached smile.

"Do you care as much as that—for the other man?" he asked.

Victoria nodded silently.

"Well then," said Billy, "I'll go to him. I'll make it all right. He cares too?"

Victoria bent her head a little lower.

"Billy," she protested, "I don't want to behave badly to you—neither does——"

"Marketel," rounded off Billy.

He went to the window and looked out. The sun was pouring down the street. The geraniums in the boxes before him had taken on that added depth of tone which sunshine bestows on all pink flowers. But Billy wasn't thinking of Nature or of the beauty of it, his mind was filled with the sense that other men were not as he was. For him, sport, adventure, were the dominant passions. With Paul Marketel, hard-headed as he was, it was evidently otherwise,—with Roger too. They were both of them men who had done things—who had affected their surroundings—changed the complexion of one event, or two: and yet for both of them, the woman of their choice was evidently the primary necessity.

"Lord!" summed up Billy Hirst, "women do seem to be a heap of trouble to some men!"

He came back and held out his hand to Victoria.

"I'm going straight to Paul," he said, "I shall make things all right with him."

Victoria colored until all her face, her neck, her very ears, were dyed scarlet, but she uttered no protest. She was not only a brave woman—she was a fine-minded one. She loved Paul, and she was sufficiently true to her woman's nature not to throw in his way any petty obstacles, born of the timidity which burkes Nature in favor of a narrow conventionality.

But Billy Hirst was not fated to see Paul Marketel that day, for he arrived at the big house just an hour after Paul and Roger had started off in the car for their appointment with the detective.

Harold Carson occupied a flat on the top story of one of those residential rabbit-warrens overlooking the park. There was nothing in the locality, still less in the look of the flat, with its lights subdued under green shades and a few bits of fine statuary showing in the tiny square hall, to suggest the man who made his daily bread by unearthing precisely those secrets which those most concerned hoped they had buried or put behind them for ever.

Roger and Marketel reached the detective's house only two or three minutes after the appointed time.

A middle-aged man-servant showed them into a small library, and Harold Carson himself rose as they entered.

He had been reading when they were announced, and Paul was curious enough to glance at the title of the book —it was an early edition of the "Romance de la Rose." Somehow the mere suggestion of such literary proclivities seemed hopeful to Paul.

Carson had met Roger before. He held out a firm white hand as Marketel was mentioned to him, and looked from one man to the other with a smile of inquiry.

For a moment none of the three present spoke. They

were all men of action, and they who make history, public or private, are well aware that on all momentous occasions he who listens has the advantage over him who speaks.

At last Carson gave a lead.

"You wanted to consult me professionally?" he inquired.

"I expect you can guess what about?" answered Roger, plunging into the matter in that abrupt manner which had only come to him in the last forty-eight hours.

"I never anticipate," answered Harold Carson with a careful smile.

It was here that Paul took up the argument.

"Mr. Carson," he said—"I take it that you read the daily papers?"

"Generally," admitted the little man mildly.

"Then you are conversant with the theft of the Chinese memorandum?"

"You take it to be a theft?" the detective asked.

"In the name of goodness, what else could it be?" Paul asked.

"My dear sir," Mr. Carson said, "so many things are not what they seem."

"The thief must be found," Paul continued grimly, "no stone must be left unturned, no expense must be spared."

It was a moment before Harold Carson spoke. He looked from one face to the other. Paul asked himself if this man too, on the first blush, had accepted the easy solution of Roger's guilt.

"Tell me exactly what you both know," he said, "but one at a time, please. Will you tell me the whole of the circumstances as they appear to you, Sir Roger, and then I shall ask Mr. Marketel to give me his version. In the meantime," he went on, addressing Paul, "will you sit in that chair there?" indicating one a little apart, "and please don't speak. If you think that Sir Roger omits anything, or makes any mistake, you can correct it when you come to give your version."

Paul stepped aside. He had been under cross-examina-

tion more than once, and he knew that many a barrister holds that a man allowed to tell his own story in his own way, proves or disproves his innocence in the process.

Roger began at once. He carefully recapitulated the events of the week-end at Zouche as he remembered them.

When he had finished, Carson asked but one question. "Have you any new servants at Zouche?" he said.

"They have all been with my mother for years," Roger answered.

"And you can answer for them?"

"For every one of them—leave them out of your mind."

The detective merely nodded and turned to Marketel.

"Please," he said, "will you give me your version. Begin as if you did not know that Sir Roger had told me anything, and never mind how much repetition there is in what you say."

Paul went as carefully through the incidents from his angle as Roger had done from his.

When he finished, Carson made no comment at all. The detective sat back in his chair and smoked one cigarette after the other. At last he rose and walked to the mantelpiece. He put his back against the shelf and arranged his position carefully so that he could keep both men under his eye.

"There seems only one possible conclusion," he began.

"And that is?" broke in Roger impatiently.

"That the Chinese memorandum was stolen from within."

"From within?" repeated Roger. "I don't understand."

"I should say it was stolen by someone staying in the house: by someone who knew the ways of the house," the detective went on. "That is why I asked if you had recently engaged a new servant. Such a servant might have been an accomplice introduced for that express purpose."

"But I tell you," Roger protested, "there was no new servant."

"Then," returned Harold Carson, "that narrows it down——"

He stopped and looked from one man to the other.

"To one of us?" Paul exclaimed, understanding him first, and he threw back his head with a gesture of denial.

"To one of my friends—to one of the house party—impossible," decided Roger vehemently.

The detective smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

"The people who were staying in the house that day are all old friends, I can answer for them as for myself," Roger went on.

"For all of them?" asked Carson.

Roger made a step forward.

"Mr. Carson," he said indignantly, "are you venturing to suggest anything against any particular guest?"

"One can never be sure of an Oriental," the little man answered. "That was what was in my mind—their standard is not ours——"

"His Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung was one of my father's most trusted friends," Roger explained. "Since my father's death, he has transferred a large part of his affection to me and my mother. You may dismiss from your mind any thought that he would do anything detrimental to my interests."

"I am sorry," returned Carson, but with a very impenitent air, "I merely put forward a racial possibility, it was no reflection on the Marquis himself."

Roger merely nodded. Paul was watching him narrowly. He could see how the fastidious nature was fretted by the mere mention of treachery among those around him. But what was to follow was destined to irk Roger far more.

"I take it," Carson went on, "that you want something more than my opinion, you wish me to arrive at facts?"

"Yes," said Roger, but doubtfully, for Mr. Carson's comments had not helped him—on the contrary, they irritated him, "we asked you to see us for that."

"I never undertake work unless I am allowed a free

hand," Carson said next. "In this instance, I should wish to come down to Zouche to see the scene of the theft, to make investigations on the spot."

"I see no objections, at present, to that," Roger answered cautiously.

"But to attain to any useful end," Carson announced, "I must see each person who was present in your house that day—men and women—guests and servants. I must be permitted to put what questions I think fit to them."

"To the women as well as the men?" exclaimed Roger.

"Precisely," answered Mr. Carson.

Roger fell back. He looked at Paul. How did such a proposition as this strike Paul? Would Paul care to see, nay, would he tolerate any inquisitorial inquiries as to Victoria Cresswell's movements? Roger felt confident that Paul would resent such a proceeding as emphatically as he himself would resent it in the case of Naomi Melsham.

"Mr. Carson," he said, "you must see that I could not propose such an indignity to my guests."

"It would be distasteful, I know," Carson answered tolerantly, "but it is the only way if I am to make a complete investigation."

"Then," shot back Roger, "the investigation must remain incomplete."

The next moment he realized that he could not afford to say that. Only a free unveiling of facts and circumstances could clear him. He fell back on one of the oldest of compromises.

"There must be some other way," he said.

"What other way?" asked Carson, with more than a trifle of obstinacy.

It was here that Paul came to Roger's help.

"Suppose you begin with the tail instead of the head," he said. "I suggest, Mr. Carson, that you begin by discovering who sold the memorandum to the Olympic people."

"Exactly," Roger interposed. "Once we unmask him, we shall have the key to the whole mystery."

"I suppose you have been to see them already?"

"We have," Paul answered. "We saw Vancrest himself—but he would tell us nothing."

"Of course not," the detective commented.

"We must find out in spite of him," Roger thrust in. He looked at the little man facing him. "Yes, Mr. Carson," he said, "first accomplish that,—then it will be time to think of coming down to Zouche."

CHAPTER XVI

Naomi Melsham could never quite remember what followed on that fateful morning immediately after her announcement that she intended to marry Roger. She had a confused notion that she found herself alone with him, that he held her close protesting his love, his gratitude, and then he suddenly pulled up and made so decided a movement of withdrawal that the exaltation was dashed with dismay. It was, she repeated to herself when she came to think of it later, but a momentary movement, indeed she tried to persuade herself that she was mistaken in its import, but all the same, it had a most decided effect on her. Without it, she might not have withdrawn herself, might not have hurried away to her own room.

She sat there up in the turret, her low chair drawn close to the fire, and she waited anxiously. She had offered herself once, the second time Roger must send for her.

She heard a certain coming and going without. She supposed the other guests were leaving, but she would not so much as appear at the window—not by a movement, not by a sign would she recall herself to any member of the De la Haye household. All the same, her whole being was alert, waiting for the approach of a messenger with a note from Roger—waiting, possibly, for the appearance of Lady de la Haye herself.

More than once she heard the coming of footsteps—they came down the corridor—nearer—then they went on. Someone had passed her door, not knocked upon it, and each time a revulsion which made her heart beat quicker told her how eagerly she was awaiting the message.

At last it came. Someone stopped before her door, knocked, and demanded admittance.

It was a maid with a note. At a glance Naomi saw

that the direction was in Roger's writing. She took the envelope and let it lie in her lap until she was alone again. Even then she lingered. What, she asked herself, had he found to say to her? He evidently expected her to answer in person, since the maid had received no orders to wait.

She broke the seal. Whatever Roger had said he had said it in a few words, since not even the back of the sheet was written on. She unfolded it and glanced down.

"Oh!" she exclaimed aloud in her involuntary dismay. This letter that she had watched for, that she had longed for, began with a formal "Dear Miss Melsham."

For one moment, every vein in Naomi's body tingled with shame. Had she offered herself merely to be rejected? The next instant, she knew that there must be some further explanation. She read down the few lines of hard, difficult words. Roger told her, almost as briefly as he had told his mother, that he would not take advantage of her generosity, that he was going away.

Her first impulse was to rise—to pull the bell, to send anyone—everyone, to stop him—then her hand fell to her side. One of the motors that she heard setting out from the entrance probably had him among its passengers. Besides, could she stop him? Could she cry to him to return? She rose. The four walls of her room had suddenly become intolerable to her. She wanted movement. She wanted space—the cold wind of the gray day to strike her face—if it were to rain, and the drizzle were to wet her, all the better.

As a matter of duty, she habitually took a daily walk. Not that exercise was a pleasure, it was a toll paid to the fact that her face was her fortune. She walked so much every day, to keep her complexion clear, just as she did gymnastics every morning after her bath, to keep a slim figure and supple limbs. But this time, the exercise was a prescription for her mind, not for her body. She stole downstairs. She stayed peeping into the hall until she

was sure that no one was about. She slipped through the door on to the terrace, and then hurried down from the terrace into the park. Even that was not enough. She hastened down the drive, eager to get away from the vicinity of Roger's house. She wanted not only to think, but to make quite sure of what she must do. She saw that taking "Life" into one's own hands and attempting to mold it, as a sculptor turns that which a moment before had been but a lump of clay, into a beautiful statue, was not quite so easy a process as she imagined. She went back mentally to the beginning of her day. She lived again the horror of the moment when she heard that Roger was to be held accountable for the loss of the memorandum. She went through the interview with him. All the time she had been near him, while she had been pleading with him, her feeling for him had not merely dwarfed her remorse, it had obliterated it. She had offered herself to him with an entire singleness of motive,—wholly and solely because she loved him. Now, a juster estimate of the case would intrude itself. Nothing could alter the cardinal fact that she, Naomi, was responsible for the position in which Roger found himself. There were extenuating circumstances, she held on tight to that. She had been driven, enmeshed, but no extenuation did anything to alter the vital point of the situation. The blame of what she had done was falling on Roger. She walked rapidly down the park. She turned into a track along the side of the plantation. The rain that she had wished for had come. It was driving along towards the belt of trees, and a breeze which got up among the beech leaves sent sprays of moisture over her as she went along.

Naomi was usually, like the most part of those who live most of their lives in Continental resorts, exceedingly sensitive to atmospheric discomforts—today, wet, damp mud, the grass-fringed path, with each spiky blade ready to pour its drops of water on to her skirt or into her boots, seemed part of the unreasonable whole. For as she walked, her mood was in a state of flow and flux. She

passed through exultation, she emerged even beyond remorse, she found herself angered against Fate, arraigning circumstances for its obvious unfairness.

She asked reproachfully why she had been tempted so urgently, and then seeing that she had succumbed so unwillingly, why the consequences had been so much farther-reaching than she had any chance of anticipating. It was like being commanded to play a new game and being refused a sight of the rules.

As she passed the head of the copse and mounted a stile into the glebe meadow, there was one solution she glanced at, only to turn away—that was—confession; for she knew that to proclaim her complicity would end her relations with Roger. Some men can forgive and go on loving. Some men can perceive and go on loving. Some men can overlook and go on loving. With all of them attraction is stronger than esteem, desire is more than fulfilment, and body more than the soul. But Roger would not love an hour were his passion deprived of its spiritual support. He offered the higher part of himself, and that higher must of necessity refuse to knowingly mate with anything less than the equivalent.

The end of the meadow brought her in sight of the church, but as soon as she saw it she turned about abruptly. It stood for the ordered, the peaceful, the long-established, and her mind was all in confusion.

She went back as far as the stile and sat down on the top step. Before she returned to Zouche, she must have a settled plan. Then a little gleam of sunshine came through the trees, and her face became soft again—tender.

She loved Roger. Faults, failings, destiny itself, could not take that joy from her. Nature had made her a large-minded woman with a great power of devotion. If she was devious, it was the fault of her upbringing. Yet the very strength of her feeling misled her—blinded her. She looked at the sunlight, and resolved to cling to Roger whatever it might cost her. The deed was done, the memorandum copied, its contents made public: nothing

could bring back things to what they had been when the old Chinaman entered Zouche de la Haye, nothing could restore to Roger the confidence of the Foreign Office. What could not be changed must be made endurable.

Naomi Melsham rose quickly to her feet, lifted her chin, and threw back her head. She knew now what she must do—nay, so little did she estimate that she told herself confidently—that at last she had come to the solution. She must so wind herself into the procession of Roger's days, so identify herself with him, so interpose her personality between him and disappointment, so fill his life, that frustrated ambition would have no chance to goad or irk him, that disgrace would hardly cast a shadow over his days.

There, she told herself, she had discovered how to recompense Roger for the wrong she had unwittingly done him. There lay not only his happiness, but her expiation. The more she reflected, the more the offering of herself seemed to take the scarlet out of her sin: until, at last, she all but reduced her mind to an acceptance of the notion—a typically feminine one, maybe, since the consequence is usually the rod laid heaviest on a woman's shoulders—that a sin is hardly a sin if the perpetrator but makes it up to the victim in sufficiently ample measure.

In other words, she contrived to so separate her affection from her failings that they seemed to her as much apart as if they were the north and south aspect of a house—both parts of one whole and both entirely independent of each other.

When Naomi Melsham had impressed that on her willing mind, she hurried back to Zouche and as she pulled up a moment in the hall, it was to send a message to Roger's mother asking when she might see her.

Word came back that Lady de la Haye was in the Queen Anne sitting-room and would see her about four o'clock. The girl glanced at the watch on her wrist. She had hardly more than time to change her gown and dress her hair. The wind had blown her about, it is true, but whatever the weather might have been, her instinct would

have prompted her to make a careful toilette. She had been so taught the art of enhancing nature, by an effective setting, that it had grown to be second nature.

She went up swiftly to the large room, with its semi-circle of windows, and stood before the open doors of the wardrobe. She rejected a black dress. It might be set down as theatrical. She passed by a purple, though it especially showed off her coloring: it might be called garish. Finally, she settled on a very soft gray, and then she sat down, watch in hand, until the hands pointed to five minutes to four.

It took her only a very few minutes to reach the Queen Anne room. Her fingers did not even tremble as she turned the handle. She had never approached Lady de la Haye with more confidence. Up till now, she had always been a little afraid of those discovering eyes: of that mind, quick to piece inconvenient admissions into an equally inconvenient whole.

"I am glad you asked to see me," began Lady de la Haye, "I felt that we must have a little talk together before you left me tomorrow."

"You do not want to see me more than I want to see you," the girl answered, and with that air of self-possession which was peculiarly one of her attractions, she selected a chair, pulled it away from the light, and sat down.

But when Naomi began her moving appeal, she found that Roger's mother was by no means prepared to go whole-heartedly with her.

"Surely you understand that I think of Roger before anyone or anything else in the world," she cried out in her dismay.

Amabelle waited a little before she answered. She wished not only to be just, but generous.

"My dear," she began at length, "I am afraid your heart has carried you away. You are young and, evidently, very generous. But, wait, try to realize what the dead level of your life as Roger's wife under the new circumstances would be."

Naomi looked up quickly. She did not like the term "dead level." In spite of herself, she shuddered.

"Try," went on Amabelle, seeing that she had made an impression—"to realize what it would be like to live all day, and every other day, under a cloud of suspicion. Never to be quite sure of the attitude of your acquaintances. Never to be free from the dread of what might be said when you left the room. Never to be safe from the contemptuous pity of those who would give you the benefit of the doubt."

"I can't see why if someone did print the Chinese memorandum in the newspapers it should matter so much," Naomi cried out wrathfully.

Lady de la Haye looked up as if she heard a warning note.

"My dear," she protested. "You must know the difference between honor and dishonor."

Naomi bit her lips. She plucked nervously at her fine handkerchief. Truth peeps out of the most unexpected corners. Did she really know that distinction, did she appreciate it, apprehend it in its finer manifestations, or was there a moral line too fine for her sensibility to perceive?

The thought hurt her so much that Naomi Melsham realized a new factor had come into her life. Her love for Roger was not only to be the joy of her days but their torture also. Nature may spare a man the consequences of his misdoings, but she prepares a refinement of cruelty in the way of expiation for a woman. Let Eve have but once eaten the apple, and though even if she repent with tears and lamentation, her heart will lose no occasion to remind her that, though she do her best to wash herself clean, that does nothing to alter the fact that once she rolled in the mud.

Lady de la Haye marked the downward droop of the golden head, the falling of the supple shoulders.

"My dear," she cried out quickly, for she never could take advantage of a worsted adversary, "I am sure I

understand. You did not really mean what you said. You were rebelling against the injustice to Roger."

Naomi made herself nod an acquiescence. She perceived that today there was but one link, and that the placing of Roger first, between herself and this fine-minded woman.

"Thank you," she said, "I am glad you realize how very much Roger is to me."

Amabelle looked round the room so intimately impressed with her individuality. For the second time in twelve hours, her boy's future hung in the balance and yet she told herself everything was going on as if it were an ordinary day at Zouche. She felt as if even inanimate nature should have turned out of its course and it seemed almost purposefully inconsiderate on their part that the chairs should stand on their four legs and the tables go on fulfilling their functions as tables, just as they had done when everything was peaceful and serene.

It was Naomi who broke the silence.

"Lady de la Haye," she said, "why do you say all this to me?"

"For the same reason," answered Amabelle, "that makes Roger leave you today. Neither my son nor I would take advantage of your generosity."

"It isn't generosity," Naomi protested, for she was reduced to very plain speaking, "it's love."

"Then," said Roger's mother, "I will put it in another way. Do you think your love will be strong enough to stand the daily round of your life with Roger? Is your love strong enough," she emphasized as Naomi made a protesting gesture, "to make you think first, to make you think always, of a man who will be broken by disgrace, bruised by no fault of his own? Are you strong enough to make allowance—an allowance large enough, ample enough, for a man soured by an unjust accusation? I foresee that Roger will not be easy to live with, that there will be many thorns and few roses along the path of anyone who walks by his side now. Think of all that—and,

if you can't depend on yourself, take advantage of his letter and go away now."

"It would half kill me," gasped Naomi.

"It is better to die by one blow, than to gasp out one's life by inches," maintained Lady de la Haye stubbornly.

Naomi bowed her head. She understood. Lady de la Haye had given her the chance to retreat. If she stayed, Roger's mother would never spare her.

She sat still for quite a long time, and Lady de la Haye was so determined not to hurry the answer by so much as a gesture, that, agitated as she was, she took up some knitting. She kept the needles moving rapidly, clicking evenly as they worked off row after row.

She had made the position clear and she was too wise to obscure it with a multitude of words. She glanced at the clock. Time, she had observed, generally took a hand in the crises of human existence.

Littleport always brought tea into this room when there were no men guests in the house. But, first, he would come in with the afternoon letters.

While Sir Arthur lived, he and his wife had made quite a festival of the tête-à-tête meals. It had been a moment of deep intimacy. A time when their feelings for each other were strong enough to banish any worry, small or great, that might arrive under the cover of a postage stamp. All through Roger's life this hour, too, had been a time apart. Amabelle as she lifted her eyes from the old clock, with its moon face topping its long body of walnut and Dutch inlay, glanced once at Naomi, then she went carefully back to the knitting.

At length the tall girl rose. Slowly she put her chair aside. She walked round it and stood against the white mantelpiece, with its inlaid medallions of Adam design, with its dignity of design, of line, which showed off her own beauty; she put up one arm on the narrow shelf.

"You are quite right to think it will take me all my time to live up to Roger," she returned, "but not for the reason you give, but because I myself——"

She stopped—she could not dissect her own heart—equally, she could not expose her own motive. She fell back on crude assertion.

"I do not fear anything," she announced, "neither unpleasantness nor worse as long as Roger looks to me for happiness: as long as I make the happiest part of his life." She moved a pace away from the support of the marble shelf. She stood up straight, assertive.

"Please believe that," she added.

"And," she continued, "I mean to try to make him happy."

Lady de la Haye heard the decision.

"I think only of Roger," she returned.

Naomi looked at the graceful white-haired woman oddly.

It suddenly occurred to her that Lady de la Haye never could know, quite, what made her love so deep a thing. This beautiful white-haired woman had no contrast to go by. She had never known a daily round of makeshift, one in which the finer feelings of existence were so conspicuously absent.

"You can't even dimly realize what Roger is to me," she cried out.

If the girl expected a reply, some reminder that she was not the only woman in the world who loved a man, she was mistaken.

Roger's mother was wholly occupied with one point. She saw that the decision was made, and she did not propose to comment on it.

"Littleport will be here in five minutes," she said. "If you want to write to Roger by this post, you must finish your letter before Littleport comes in."

"But," cried out Naomi, "I will not write."

"You will not write," repeated Lady de la Haye.

"I have told him all there was to say."

"Then," asked the white-haired woman, "what do you propose to do?"

Naomi half smiled. She looked at the clock again.

The older woman followed her glance, and it was Roger's mother who always remembered that the face of the man on the dial, half-turned over to denote the waning of the moon, seemed to grin at her.

"When I leave here tomorrow," Naomi went on, "Roger will come back to you, he will talk to you. You must make him see that the greatest wrong of all would be to deny me the place that his love and mine give me."

Lady de la Haye smiled very grimly. They were fencing without foils now, and, after all, it takes another woman to be really cruel to a woman.

"You think I can send Roger to you," she cried out.

"I know you can," Naomi answered.

She walked across the room and stood up by the window.

"Don't you see," she answered as she flung around, "no one else can do it but you. No one else can convince him that it is for his happiness—and mine."

Amabelle de la Haye let her knitting slip on to her lap, and as she sat still, it traveled over her silk skirt and dropped on to the floor. She used quaint old tortoiseshell pins and they struck together as they fell. The sharp click was the only noise in the room and it seemed to draw itself out with a disproportionate echo.

At last Roger's mother rose slowly to her feet.

She walked to the writing-table. She took up the photograph of her husband. She was so often very lonely, but she had never felt the need for support as she did at this moment. She looked across to the tall golden-haired girl waiting for her to speak.

"I know your standing by Roger will make things easier for him now," she began, "but, as I have said before, there is the time to come. If you are reckoning on his being cleared, on his honor being vindicated—I must tell you, I am not sanguine. My boy is innocent, but who copied the memorandum? I ask you," and now the low voice rang full with passion—"I ask you, who copied the memorandum?—That is what you will have to help to find out. This is what Roger will never rest until he has found out."

Naomi put up her hand as if to ward off a blow.

"Don't," she faltered, "it—it—it is so dreadful."

Lady de la Haye came a step nearer. She put her hand on the gray sleeve.

"There," she said dully, "that is the situation you will have to face."

"Never mind," cried back Naomi, "what I have to face. Never mind what I have to endure, what I suffer, only tell yourself until you believe it, that I love Roger. Only realize somehow, that if cutting me into mincemeat would make Roger happy, I'd smile while the knife went in, as long as he went on loving me, being happy with me."

The girl's voice had but just died down when Littleport entered, bringing in the afternoon post.

Lady de la Haye took the bundle of letters addressed to her and laid them aside. They had been written to another Lady de la Haye, and she would answer them presently as those left behind answer letters to the dead.

Littleport went round by the writing-table, and, as he was a methodical soul, he put two long-backed walnut chairs in their places as he went.

"This is for you, Ma'am," he said to Naomi.

It was addressed in Mrs. Melsham's writing, and as the girl turned it over she saw imprinted across the flap of the envelope the name of a hotel in Enghien.

Naomi's face stiffened, hardened. Instantly she guessed that something had happened. Mrs. Melsham had announced her intention of waiting in London until her daughter jointed her, but Naomi knew that no maternal consideration would keep her mother away for an hour from anything that seemed to promise more amusement. What would restrain Mrs. Melsham was the money. A week ago their funds had been at the lowest ebb. Naomi wondered, and yet she dared not ask herself, who had supplied the necessary cash.

With a quick word to ask permission, the girl broke the flap. She glanced down the scrawled sheet. She looked at Lady de la Haye.

" Mama has gone away," she gasped. " She has left our hotel. She has gone to Enghien."

Lady de la Haye looked up slowly. Nothing about Naomi's mother had pleased her, but she had not been prepared for this.

" What does she propose you should do? " she asked.

" Mama seems to think I shall stay here for a few days longer."

" Why should she do that? " asked Roger's mother. " Did I not say definitely ' from Friday to Wednesday '? "

" Yes," faltered Naomi.

She picked up the letter. It was as frank as Mrs. Melsham could be when she saw no advantage in being circumspect. She said in exactly so many words that she considered her daughter's presence undesirable and counseled her to get herself invited to stay longer at Zouche.

Naomi had been served in the same way before, and, before, she had met the situation as part of the routine of her life. Now, she could not intrigue for further free board and lodging, neither could she just disappear. There were places where she could hide, and lead a tea and sardine existence. She had done that before, but at this instant she must be somewhere where Roger could come to her. She longed, and longed passionately, to be protected, chaperoned as other girls in her place would be.

It was quite a little time while the two women remained silent. At length Naomi began nervously to tear her letter into strips. She was as homeless as a street arab, and when that pressed home into her mind her strength came to an end. She had borne up under hours of misery. She had showed a proud front to the most penetrating of all inquisitions, but her mother's defection broke her down.

She began to cry, standing up there, facing Lady de la Haye. Her grief was not noisy. It was that painful emotion which puckers the face, which wrings the lips thin, which forces the tears out of the eyes that they dull as they leave them.

Roger's mother looked up. The girl's abandonment de-

prived her of all power of movement. She looked on, watching, and as she watched, her mind formed one phrase, and having formed it, went on repeating it.

"I wish she would sit down to cry," Amabelle de la Haye kept on repeating to herself. "It is not the way to cry standing—she should sit down."

At length Naomi put up her hands. She rubbed the backs of them across her eyes. Her handkerchief was tucked into her sleeve, but she did not think of using it. She put up her hands and she brushed the tears aside with them, as the most primitive among her sisters might have done.

"Don't," murmured Lady de la Haye, at last.

Naomi caught the one halting word.

She walked across. She let her arms fall on either side of her.

"I must tell you," she began brokenly, "there has never been any real sympathy between mama and myself. I always knew that she found me in her way when she wanted to enjoy herself. I have been left behind often before. I—I never minded before, but today it hurt so—because——"

She broke off. She had excused her breakdown, but Amabelle felt that more was to come.

Lady de la Haye looked up. There were plenty of giddy mothers who found grown-up daughters in the way. She was beginning to ask herself what was the something more at the bottom of the girl's distress. But at that very moment a tapping came at the French window leading on to the terrace.

Both the women within the Queen Anne room turned abruptly. Outside, was a woman's figure, and the hand that had tapped a moment ago was fumbling now to unlatch the casement.

Lady de la Haye glanced at Naomi. Whoever this intruder might be, she must not see Naomi Melsham with the tears running down her cheeks. The same thought came to the girl even more quickly. The white-haired woman watched the struggle for self-possession, and she saw a

success so rapid, so complete, that it could not be the first time that Roger's future wife had drawn a convenient mask over her face at short notice. The very success of the transformation dismayed Lady de la Haye.

The next moment she rose. She walked to the window, while the figure without, finding the casement latched inside, had taken to tapping again.

"Annie," exclaimed Amabelle, "how did you get here?"

Mrs. Tune, Annie Tune, as she was called by all her acquaintances, walked into the room.

She was a tall individual, with hair of that uncertain shade between brown and gray, and a face where no feature matched with the other. Her garments hung on her anyhow, and she had a genius for wearing the wrong things wrongly colored.

Further, she was fairly well-to-do, and had a passion for other people's affairs. She met with more than her share of rebuffs, but she never saw one of them, so possessed was she with the notion that she was essential to each and every event passing for twenty miles around.

She entered in a hurry now, and tripped over the carpet. She laid both her hands—they were in odd gloves and neither of them was buttoned—on Lady de la Haye's arm to right herself, and, as she clung there, she began to expostulate in an exasperatingly breathless voice.

"My dear," she gasped, "you should tell Littleport not to be so stupid. He actually assured me you were not at home: as though you would deny yourself to me. Luckily, I had an inspiration. I remembered the way round by the terrace, so I stopped the motor at the corner and got out."

Lady de la Haye murmured a reply, and when Mrs. Tune had sufficiently recovered her balance to stand firmly on her own feet, she looked round to make sure who was the second occupant of the room.

For a moment no one spoke. Mrs. Tune smiled as if she were telling herself something interesting, and then she walked on a pace. As a matter of fact, she was assuring herself that Amabelle de la Haye, for all her worldly experi-

ence, was wanting in *savoir vivre,* and that "the wife of a diplomat ought to have good manners at least."

She determined to take the matter into her own hands, and incidentally to hint to her old friend where she was lacking.

"I think we have met before," she began, as she walked up to Naomi.

"Miss Melsham—Mrs. Tune," Lady de la Haye was compelled to add.

The unbidden visitor stood with her hand half extended.

"Melsham!" she remarked, "I seem to know that name."

She sat down. She pushed a glove on to her lean wrist and half peeled it off. It was obvious that she was searching in her memory as one searches for a particular snippet in a ragbag.

Lady de la Haye interrupted the process.

"Did you want to see me about something important, Annie?" she began.

"My dear," Mrs. Tune exclaimed, as she looked up, "I read the news in the paper this morning. Directly I realized that there had been a theft in your house—such an odd one, too—I made up my mind to come over and hear all about it. Everyone will want to know, of course, and they are sure to come to me since I am so reliable. So queer of you, dear, I must say, to let curious people, who really may not wash themselves every day, come and pay each other money in your house."

The two women heard this version of an international agreement, and let it pass without comment.

But Mrs. Tune had yet more to say.

"I think it is a pity that Roger should be away from Zouche now," she resumed.

"How did you know that he was not here?" gasped Amabelle.

Annie Tune smiled with superiority. Like many mediocre people, nothing gave her such joy as to believe that she possessed exclusive information.

"I have the knack of knowing things," she announced

complacently, and then, condescending to particulars, she added, "I was in the village when a big yellow car raced past. I managed to see that Roger was in it. I suppose that was a friend driving him? They were going well over twenty miles an hour."

She looked round as she vindicated the speed limit, and included Naomi in a wide tepid smile.

The girl moved up a pace. She did not take a chair, but she surveyed the untidy figure attentively, curiously certain that this foolish old woman's interruption would somehow influence her private concerns.

Mrs. Tune answered the look with a sudden cry of triumph.

"There," she ejaculated. "I have it now. There was a Mrs. Melsham that year I went to Nice after the mumps."

Lady de la Haye answered with a question. We do sometimes turn aside from information. One wonders why. Is it just nerves—or some latent sense of fair play to the being whose private concerns are about to be discussed?

"Do you mean to go abroad this year?" she asked.

Mrs. Tune shook her head.

"So many people miss me," she affirmed.

She turned back to Naomi.

"Of course," she persisted, "Melsham is not a common name, but the Mrs. Melsham at Nice—what was it about her? Was it she was so good-looking? She was that woman who used to gamble at the Casino."

Naomi came a step nearer. She clasped her hands together. She waited for what might be coming next. But the particular snippet that Mrs. Tune had detached from her mental rubbish heap led her no farther.

"You keep your room very hot, Amabelle," she began.

She put up her hands to unfasten the straggling feathers round her neck, but the boa entangled itself in her floating veil, and then the veil hooked on to the fastening of her pince-nez. Naomi solicitously offered her help, and as she disentangled the muddle, she looked across at Lady de la Haye.

Amabelle understood. Fate was driving her again, had driven her indeed, right on to the rocks.

With the next words, Mrs. Tune, mumbling round a bunch of feathers, completed the shipwreck.

"I thought all your house party were sure to have left you," she went on. "I made sure I should find you alone, and that it would be a relief to you to tell me all about it."

A curious light touched Lady de la Haye's face. She rose slowly. In the stressful moments of life, humanity seems to find a certain consolation in the knowledge that it is standing planted on its own two feet.

"My house party has gone," she said slowly, "Naomi is different."

Mrs. Tune wagged her head sideways with a jerk.

"Eh," she articulated, ungracefully.

Naomi stepped back. She left the veil clinging to the hook, and Annie Tune, with her face half covered, squinted round a roll of net.

"Eh?" she repeated, when she saw that Lady de la Haye was looking very straight at her.

The white-haired woman glanced aside now, glanced to where Naomi was standing, one hand resting on the writing-table.

"You know, Annie," resumed Amabelle, "that there has been a theft from this house. The papers told you so much, but they did not tell you that Roger would be in despair but for one thing . . ."

She stopped. Mrs. Tune looked up quickly.

"I thought," she muttered tactfully, "that Roger would be too much upset to think of anything but the consequences of what he had done."

For a moment Lady de la Haye's composure all but deserted her. The next instant she had herself in hand.

"You know my boy, Annie," she said quietly, "therefore I need not defend him to you."

"He hurt me very much dashing past and not even lifting his hat," the dear lady interposed.

The white-haired woman smiled grimly.

"I think," she said, "that perhaps he was a little preoccupied."

Mrs. Tune said "Oh" to that, and the next instant suggested that Roger would have done well to stop and tell her all about it.

"You will be the first to hear one thing, at least, Annie," went on Lady de la Haye. "Naomi——"

Mrs. Tune looked from the speaker to the girl by the table. She scented a love story.

"What now?" she asked curtly. Mrs. Tune among other things was a matchmaker, and she always was affronted if her preserves were invaded.

Lady de la Haye walked across the room. She stood up by Naomi. She put her hand on the girl's arm.

"Naomi is going to stay with me," she went on, "for some time. In fact, I think Roger will persuade her to remain at Zouche always."

Mrs. Tune heard, and her lower jaw dropped.

"Indeed," she said, and she gave her veil a final wrench and tore a hole through which her nose poked.

It was a full minute before she recollected, not so much what custom demanded of her, but what was advisable, if she were to maintain a footing, the footing she wished to be on at Zouche.

"How nice of you both to tell me first," she began.

Lady de la Haye looked once more at Naomi, then she went to the writing-table. She found a telegraph form and took up her pen. Littleport, followed by another manservant, brought in tea and she asked him to wait a moment.

The old man stood back. Mrs. Tune's attention was momentarily diverted to the footman's trousers. She was sure they were getting worn, and nothing, she was telling herself, showed such bad taste as shabby finery.

Amabelle rose. She crossed to Naomi. She laid the sheet before her. "Will that do?" she said.

Naomi looked down.

"Return immediately. Naomi remains with us. We both want you. Your Mother"—the girl read.

CHAPTER XVII

In the big battles of life, there are some victories which seem only given us by the grimly smiling gods in order to intensify the bitterness of our subsequent defeat. Surely the Fates are malicious—or worse. Such are the conclusions common to weak and routed spirits when the ambitious edifice they have built on foundations of self-deceit suddenly tumbles into dust.

It was such thoughts which played unintentionally—hopelessly—through the mind of Naomi de la Haye as she stood at the window of the hotel in Venice on an afternoon of a late September day—some months after the *affaire* of the Chinese memorandum had ceased to be a nine days' wonder. She had been married to Roger de la Haye barely three months, and already the iron heel of reality was trampling down the illusion under which she had married him. "Nothing can make up to a man for the loss of his honor—that's what I didn't understand"—the phrase spoken unconsciously summed up the whole position, and beat itself into her brain. Her lip quivered ever so slightly but not in self-pity. After all—she had known happiness—all-absorbing happiness—for two whole months, nine weeks, sixty irrevocable days and nights. Until ten days ago she had even been flushed with victory,—"Love had conquered. She had been right," she had told herself triumphantly. *She* was Roger's world, her love a nepenthe so deep that the whispering of the outside adverse forces could never break their dream. Well! that was illusion. It had gone like the others, but nothing could rob her of the memories of those days of perfect joy—no suffering in store for her could mar or dim them. They had been cloudless—almost, —they had been a time of real companionship of heart, of mind, of spirit.

Swiftly she went back over that golden time—back to that June day at Zouche, when at the very moment when the crime seemed to overwhelm her—Amabelle de la Haye had put out a saving hand. All that was fine and strong and true in Amabelle's nature had been drawn—almost against prudence and judgment and suchlike of the meaner virtues —towards this mother-deserted girl—and, deep calling unto deep, the potential strength and beauty of Naomi's character had throbbed responsive to it. Between the older and the younger woman there grew up a silent understanding—a mute confidence. It had no quality of deceit—there were things in the girl's life of which Naomi could not speak—Amabelle de la Haye recognized that,—and she had no wish that they should be paraded for her inspection, for being herself of fine sensitiveness, she realized instinctively that whatever the aspect of these untold experiences, their effect on the girl had been ennobling, not besmirching, and she had no wish that they should be dragged from proper burial. Amabelle was still to know many qualms for her son's happiness, but, despite them all, she never doubted the rightness of that impulse which compelled her to send that telegram to Roger and so sealed finally her choice of Naomi as her daughter-in-law.

After his mother's message Roger had, of course, no alternative but to return to Zouche. He came, if not exultantly, at least gladly. One part of him was thankful for the decision in the same way as a hungry man is grateful for bread, and the other part of him still asked if he ought not to have cleared himself first and married afterwards. But once at Zouche, back amid the soothing influence of his mother's tact (and Amabelle's sympathetic perceptions never served her better than during the weeks following) and the tender, half-shy, half-eager way in which Naomi marked out her love for him, Roger could but drift with the stream.

It seemed expedient from every point of view that the marriage should take place as speedily as possible. The ceremony was performed in a quiet little church in London, with only Marketel and Victoria, in addition to Lady de la

Haye, to look on. Even Mrs. Melsham was not present. Up to twelve hours before the marriage day she had been expected, then a telegram was received from her saying she had sprained her ankle and was unable to move, but by the last post that same evening Naomi received a letter from her mother. It was written from a hotel in Aix. It was filled with good wishes and the expressions correct for the occasion. The very smugness of such protestations filled Naomi with repulsion. She knew that each word had been written with the possibility in view that it might be read by Lady de la Haye or Roger.

The girl rose and was about to strike a match. She would not tear up anything so artificial, she would burn it; and then she saw that there was an additional slip of paper still within the cover. She took it out. "Do not be uneasy about my sprained ankle," she read, "it will prevent my traveling, but it does not interfere with my *bien-être* here."

As she read the strange message, as she guessed all it implied, Naomi's face softened. She understood—her mother was staying away purposely—it was the kindest thing she could do, and the girl found it in her heart to be grateful for such an unusual mark of consideration.

After they were married, Roger and Naomi left for Italy. The suggestion had come from Amabelle, and Naomi was only too glad to leave England;—away from the sights, the sounds, the atmosphere which perpetually reminded Roger of his trouble, she hoped to gain such an ascendancy over his mind, that it would make her love the fence between him and the censorious world of which she had dreamed.

At first, she succeeded even beyond her hopes. They went to a little place high up in the mountains, above Lake Garda, for the August heat. Roger walked with her there, sketched with her, painted her portrait against this background, against that. He read to her—but what mattered most to her, his whole face lighted up when she returned to him after even a brief interval. In truth—Roger was happy. Love had thrust aside recollection. He did not refuse to think, but the hours were so filled by this beautiful woman

who knew how to provide him with a stimulus for each waking moment, that his days had no time for retrospection, and his nights were dreamless.

But when the sunshine went off the lake, when the autumn rains came, when out of doors it was dreary and their little rooms in the quaint hotel which had been so picturesque in the warmth, began to feel draughty and cold, Roger's spirits flagged. One afternoon Naomi came on him looking disconsolately out of the window.

"I've been drifting," he said to her, "it's been pleasant, but one can't go on drifting for a lifetime."

Naomi drew back for a moment in dismay. All these weeks she had made Roger happy—she had been stronger than regret—stronger even than his recollection—she could not have everything spoiled now. She rallied herself and smiled back at him.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, "you call it drifting. I call it living. One day of sunshine is worth ten years of gray skies. Don't let our summer end one hour before it needs. If it's growing dismal here, why should we not try some other place?"

Roger turned quickly.

"I think you are right," he said. "Where shall we go? Venice—there is a good train from here, we might be off tomorrow?"

Naomi opened her lips to assent. She had never been to Venice. The color, the whole individuality of the Queen of the Adriatic was a thing she had always longed to see, but she checked herself. Venice was cosmopolitan. Venice belonged to the great world. She purposed that Roger should return to the bustle among which henceforth he must live and yet in which he must not participate, one step at a time, not with a sudden plunge from solitude into the vortex.

"I have always wanted to see Venice," she began.

"Well then?" he asked, wondering why she hesitated.

"But couldn't we go there by stages?" she asked. "There are all these old towns, Verona, Bologna, Padua—we have

read so much about them—couldn't we go and see some of them?"

Roger laughed—gay again. How good a thing was his married life. Each day he discovered new channels of sympathy, new communities of taste. How wonderful that he and Naomi should ever have found each other. What if he had not gone to the Tippley-Smiths' dance? What if twenty small details had been other than they were?

"Isn't it lucky," he said aloud, taking her arm, "that you and I have so many likings in common? Now, since you won't have Venice, where will you go?"

"Anywhere," she replied promptly. "I don't mind where we begin, each place is so interesting. Fancy, every town with a story of its own. All Italy is full of life."

"Of emotion you mean," he said to tease her.

"What if I do," she retorted. "Isn't emotion the mainstay of life?"

"I rather thought action was," he answered banteringly.

"That's a parochial idea," she went on out of her newfound wisdom. "Action is a diminishing power, emotion is an increasing one."

He laughed again and let the argument go, but she had chased away his moodiness. Till now, she had always been able to do this, and it sometimes surprised her to find what leaps her own mind, urged by her love, could take. Not that her ideas were profound or her premises by any means correct. But, she had ideas and could offer them for his consideration. He might agree; he might contradict. That was a point of small importance, what counted was that her mind could act on his mind and that out of the contrast came sympathy and interest, an increasing nearness, a blending of their dual individualities into one well-balanced whole. But a little more—but so little more—she told herself, and Roger would be so entirely hers that she must succeed in keeping him happy always.

Roger found that their best way was to go to Verona. It was a junction and a good train stopped there, so to Verona they went the following afternoon. They arrived

as the night was falling, and Naomi saw the amphitheater, with the moon in the sky, with the cypress trees, each clad in its own shadow, ringed about it.

She turned to Roger after the first look. Their eyes met. He bent and kissed, not her face but her hand. She understood. She was the perfect woman to him, and before her rose the thing she had almost succeeded in putting behind her—the sinister memory of how she came to be by his side at all.

"Are you tired?" Roger asked, seeing that her face was suddenly overcast.

"I think," she answered, "I am overcome."

He nodded contentedly. It was pleasant to him to feel that his wife was thus moved by beauty not made by human hands. "Thank goodness," he murmured inwardly, "that her enjoyment isn't bounded by dress and dancing."

He let her remain silent a little longer. Naomi could not look at him, for she felt what was passing in his mind. She had quieted him with a lie. This evening that fact hurt her. A month ago she would have accepted the solace and ignored the means. So even her best endeavor was to be her scourge.

"I'm growing away from the things I used to accept and find good enough," she told herself. "Roger is teaching me, his standard is so much higher than mine."

"Let us go back," she said suddenly, and Roger, after one more lingering look, took her to the hotel, and seeing she still looked tired, read to her until he himself grew absorbed in the volume of Bourget's "Sensations d'Italie."

The next morning the sun was out, and the market in the Piazza d'Erbi was in full swing. Naomi stood looking at the animated groups of peasant women, each eager to sell her own particular basket of vegetables.

"You ought to make a sketch of this," she began to Roger, and then she saw him glance eagerly along the square of rugged pavement.

"Look," he said, "I believe that's Helmside." He pointed to a man, an Englishman, who was coming towards

them. "I was in Vienna with him," Roger went on. The man (he was evidently some ten years older than Roger) was almost up to them. Roger's glance compelled his glance. Naomi saw his face break into a look of recognition. A few steps more and he and Roger must meet. Then the Englishman looked carefully into the square, he made a step aside and disappeared through the door of the Signiory.

Roger clutched at Naomi's arm.

"Did you see that?" he muttered. "He didn't want to meet me. He deliberately avoided me."

Naomi shivered as if the cold wind from the snow-topped mountains had caught her. It would be futile to attempt a denial. She slid her fingers into his.

"We have each other," she said.

"Good God," he murmured, "and this is the life I have dragged you into."

This time she answered with spirit.

"You dragged me into nothing," she declared. "What I did, I did of my own free will, I was proud to do it—it was my right."

Her vehemence made Roger drop the subject, but the joy had gone out of Verona for him. Once he murmured something about wondering if Helmside had put up at the same hotel as themselves.

"Does it matter if he has?" Naomi asked, striving to speak lightly. "I think we have about exhausted Verona."

"Why, last night you said you could stay here for weeks," he answered.

She kept her face from him. He must not see that she was afraid, he must not read on it that she felt trapped.

"Last night," she said, "the moonlight tended to enthusiasm, the daylight has brought wisdom. The amphitheater was so exquisite; let us keep our one perfect impression and not run any risk by staying to visit it again."

Roger made no further demur. He did not believe in Naomi's explanation, he realized suddenly that she was play-

ing a part—she was making it easy for him to avoid Helmside. He was grateful, and he went to the station willingly, but in the train he asked himself, could he always run away, dragging his wife along behind him—must not the time come when he must face old acquaintances in society?

The question stayed in his mind. Naomi knew there was something worrying him all the week they spent in Bologna. She felt her husband was slipping from her, that all her efforts to make herself necessary to him were vain.

The proposal to spend a day in Ferrara came from Roger. Naomi and he had been reading the story of those two wonderful Este women and she looked forward to interesting Roger in the Castello. But the evidence of the pomp and splendor of those old rulers left him cold. He walked through the rooms, where so strangely little is left to tell of the dominant personalities who made them, with almost as bored an air as the average tourist, he even asked, when Naomi was preparing to go down to see the dungeons, if she were not tired now, and whether they had better not return another day.

She shook her head. Physical fatigue was better than long hours spent watching Roger looking moodily before him as he had done the previous night.

She looked into the gray vaulted mouth of the opening, she saw the worn steps of the steep stone staircase, she even marked the little tufts of moss on them, the trickle of damp. It was desolate—but absorbing. Roger must come with her, Roger must see the situations in which other people had suffered—the pang of sympathy shared together, would be another chord to throb in unison, another appeal to that communion she was for ever trying to establish.

"Come with me," she said, "I don't want to go alone."

An old woman, bent, toothless, with wisps of gray hair streaming about her wrinkled cheeks, was waiting with a lantern, and she saw the gesture which accompanied Naomi's words.

"The Signora need not be afraid," she said to Roger. "I will take care of her."

"It is not that, Mother," he answered, for he was a fine Italian scholar, "it is that two are better than one."

"Aye," acquiesced the disheveled old creature, "and so the aged find out when they are left alone."

She led the way down into the horrible holes into which human beings were cast to gasp out their days of misery. She looked from the fine man to the lovely woman as she recounted the stories incident to each dungeon. It was evident that she felt a certain friendliness to her listeners just because they were good to look upon, just because the feast of life appeared to be spread before them. There was nothing of the perfunctory manner of the ordinary guide about her. The legends she spoke of were magnificent, outstanding, to her, and she expected her listeners to be thrilled for precisely the same reason as she was.

At length they came to an *oubliette,* the deepest, the most unwholesome of all.

"The prison of Parisiana," she said.

Roger knew the story. Byron has made it into a poem. It was a typical story of those full-blooded days—the oft-told theme of a woman who loved, who defied fate, who was pulled up, cut short. But when he finished describing how, when Parisiana was led out to be beheaded by the orders of her outraged husband, even the guards drew back in dismay—she was so young, so lovely, so brave—the old woman set down her lantern with its wedge of guttering candle, she drew up her crooked body, threw back her head, while into her old eyes there came a light which betrayed how she had looked when she was young.

"The Signor forgets what the Lady Parisiana said," she protested.

"What did she say?" Roger asked.

"She told the guards not to pity her," the old woman answered, "she said the present mattered nothing, not even that she was to die in an hour, because she had known transcendent love—the flowering time of the heart—nothing could take from her the happiness that she had enjoyed."

Involuntarily Roger looked at Naomi. His glance met

hers. Silently they walked up the narrow steps, still speechless they stood without in the old courtyard. Roger thrust a coin into the old woman's hand, and when she went off, invoking the miscellaneous collection of saints to see to it that those who knew how to be generous to the poor were suitably rewarded, and Roger was sure that he and Naomi were alone, he pulled her close to him.

"Did you hear what the old woman said?" he asked huskily.

Naomi clung to him and nodded silently.

"She has got hold of the right end of life," he went on, "there is nothing which really counts as love does. It's strange," he mused, "that a poor old creature such as she should perceive the essential, and so many others, with far more opportunities, miss it."

"But," breathed Naomi, "we have not missed it."

"No," said Roger, "what was it Parisiana called it?"

"The flowering time of the heart," Naomi told him.

"We have had our flowering time," Roger went on. "It's been a veritable garden of blossoms. We must always remember that—*whatever* may come—like Parisiana, we have had our day, and nothing can take the memory of that from us."

"But," she protested, "our happiness is not over. Surely," she went on, "if these weeks have meant anything, they have taught us that we are enough for each other. Let us always cling to that—just you and I together—a charmed circle within, and the world without, nothing."

"Will that content you?" he asked.

"Will that content you?" she cried back.

"Yes," he answered tenderly, almost reverently, and if she fancied there was a shade of reservation in his tone, yet the assurance meant so much to her that she would not hear it. "He is happy," she told herself, "he is perfectly happy."

The rapt look remained in her eyes as they went through the gate which led out of the town, as they went down the strip of dusty road to the station. They were going on to Padua that evening. The few days spent in Padua were

not quite a success. Roger was still interested, still acquiescent, but certain signs of restlessness manifested themselves.

One evening he told Naomi that he had given orders that his letters from England were to be sent to Venice. The next day he referred to these letters again. The next evening when the landscape out of their window was neutral-tinted, and the country as they could see it, brown, he turned to her with a suppressed longing.

"The partridges will want shooting at Zouche," he said.

Then she knew that they must go on at once. Venice was larger, more in the movement of the world. She hoped that there, with more comfortable quarters, with so much to see, she could capture Roger's spirit again.

"You must show me the real Venice," she said, as they came out of the ugly modern station and stepped into a gondola. She hoped he would order the boatman to take them up the Grand Canal, but instead he said, "Hôtel de l'Univers," and turning back to his wife he added, "Letters may be waiting for us there . . . perhaps some news . . ."

The sentence trailed away unfinished. There was no need for words, Naomi knew of what he was thinking.

Once at the hotel, Roger's first demand again was for letters.

"I didn't know you were so eager for them," Naomi ventured.

"I don't think I was while we were in outlandish places," he answered, "it's different now."

He went directly to the bureau and gave his name sharply. "Sir Roger de la Haye," he said, and the concierge assured him, with his most obsequious bow, that the letters for "Sir Haye and Milady were upstairs in the salon especially reserved for them on the first floor."

"Let us go up and see what there is at once," he said.

Nothing in an Italian hotel gets itself accomplished quite as quickly as that. It was necessary to ring for the floor waiter, and the floor waiter, when he did appear in the hall, had to ring for the lift, but at length, Naomi and Roger

found themselves in that long apartment—"The Noble Room," as it is known—facing the canal, which is a feature of every old palace in Venice.

It was still early. The gray mist flushed with lemon, still lingered on the water, on the great church across the canal. Naomi's first impulse was to go to the windows, to open them, to step out on to the balcony, to draw Roger after her, but an exclamation from her husband stopped her. "Here are my letters—and yours," he said.

He sank on to the nearest chair. The written word was the paramount thing to him; the mere chance of a hint from home was his first concern.

Naomi muttered something about being hot and dusty and the allurement of a bath, and slipped through the double doors to her own room. She threw off her hat and let down her hair before she glanced at the envelopes addressed to her. She told herself that she had no heart for them, and then she saw that the topmost one had been directed by Victoria Cresswell. The two girls had drawn very close together notwithstanding their brief acquaintance. Victoria had been at Naomi's wedding. She had shown a deep understanding of Naomi's great love. Now, Naomi found, Victoria was writing to announce her own marriage to Paul Marketel. Naomi looked at the date. The letter was nearly a month old. Victoria was Paul's wife by now. Naomi was just going to call to Roger to come and hear the good news, when she heard him calling her.

"Come at once," she heard him say. "Be quick! Do please come quickly! . . . Paul has written to me to tell me . . ."

"I know," answered Naomi, breaking in on Roger's eagerness with a laugh. "You didn't expect me to be surprised, did you?"

"Not surprised," repeated Roger as he pushed open one of the communicating doors and stood within it. "Not surprised."

She saw at once that they were at cross purposes.

"I'm alluding to Paul's marriage," she said.

"Oh, that!" answered Roger, brushing aside the matrimonial aspect as if of negligible importance. "I mean . . ."

"What?" questioned Naomi apprehensively, for as she advanced into the salon she saw, in the bright light after the semi-darkness of her bedroom, where, Italian fashion, the green shutters were fastened before the window, that Roger's face was drawn with agitation. "What is it?" she asked again breathlessly.

Roger pushed Marketel's letter into her hand.

"Carson has found out," she read, "that the man who sold the Chinese memorandum to the Olympic Press was a scoundrel called Hermann Strum. Where this man is now, or how he obtained his information, we haven't yet discovered, but Carson is pursuing his investigations with every confidence."

Paul went on to give the details of the extraordinary and mysterious way in which he came by the discovery. "It was," he wrote, "just as though I was intended to hear precisely so much and no more—for this channel of information appears to have dried up completely."

But, for the moment, neither Roger nor Naomi had time for the latest aspect of entanglement, they both fastened on the cardinal fact of a discovery. Each of them viewed it from a personal point of view.

"You see," exclaimed Roger excitedly, "that is the first ray of sunlight."

"But," murmured Naomi with a gasp, "he says he can hear no more."

"That must be only a temporary check," pursued Roger excitedly. "Give Carson but the merest lead, and I know he'll end in success. You can see,"—tapping the letter—"from what Paul says, Carson is confident now."

He threw up his arms, and stretched out his frame as if it must suddenly expand in every muscle under this good news. "I feel that we are at the beginning of the end," he went on. "Think! in a month, perhaps, we shall have found out everything! Everything!" he repeated, mouthing

the word, as if the mere sound of it revived him, animated him. He turned back to the writing-table, and seated himself. It was evident that he would not lose a moment in writing back to Paul, and then, pen in hand, he stopped, lost in conjecture. "Strum," he muttered. "Hermann Strum! Where have I heard that name before?"

That was the very question Naomi had been expecting, that she had been dreading to hear her husband ask; and therefore, with the crude idea of removing herself from his proximity, she hastened through the window into the loggia.

Venice lay spread before her, and she had never seen Venice before, but her eyes took in none of the details, neither the sweep of the most wonderful waterway in all the world, nor the riot of color where the sea reflected the sky and the atmosphere clothed all that was merely built with man's hands, with a thousand lights and shades.

She only saw Strum's face, she only saw those leering wolflike eyes, she only saw again this horrible man and the snarl with which he had brought home to her what being in the power of an unscrupulous man might mean.

The last thing she had dreamed of had come to pass. She had taken it for granted that Strum was too expert a thief not to effectively cover up his tracks, and here was his participation set down in black and white.

From that hour, Venice, as Naomi viewed Venice, was a failure. Roger was restless, excited. He sent long cablegrams to Paul and Carson, and was proportionately dejected at their disappointing replies. Nothing fresh had transpired —but they were still working. Roger grew moody—either he speculated on the unknown personality of Strum, whose name, every time it was mentioned, seemed to stab Naomi's brain—or else he would try to envisage his own life as it must be when he got home. "Look," he said, going back to the incident for the twentieth time, "you saw Helmside for yourself. Wherever I go, it will be the same. I shall be avoided, shunned—treated as he treated me, unless I am cleared—until I can clear myself."

For two, three, four days, Naomi tried to replace these

impressions with the scenes about them. She hurried breathlessly from St. Mark's to the Doges' Palace, down the Canal past the Rialto, from this church to that, and then, when the more obvious sight-seeing was done superficially, with scrambling haste, she suggested a boat over to Chiogga. Then she wanted to see a glass manufactory, not one of the huge cosmopolitan establishments laid out to entrap foreigners, but one of the little hand furnaces which have existed since the Middle Ages, on the scattered little isles past St. Mariette. But it was all to no purpose. Roger's spirit eluded her. The time had come when no sweetness would soothe his irritability. Tireless, he rang the changes on his ostracism, on Paul's discovery.

At last in very desperation, Naomi asked, "Would you like to go home?"

He turned on her eagerly—but stopped as he saw no answering enthusiasm in her eyes.

"Our plans—we were to winter in Italy," he evaded, but Naomi had seen his face. With an effort, she forced herself to laugh. "Are not plans made to be broken?" she returned, striving to speak lightly.

For a moment or two Roger was all animation. Home! Home! That was what he wanted. He would see Carson in London, Paul too. . . . He would be on the spot, in the midst of things. He could hear what was passing as soon as Carson knew it himself. If anything new did transpire, his knowledge of it would not depend on a three days' post. They could be back by the first of October, if Naomi was willing to start as soon as they could get sleeping berths.

Bravely she responded to his suggestion—hiding her misgivings—burying her fears under a gaiety half-hysterical. "The first of October," she repeated, "the first of October," and then, just to keep him away once more—from the detective whom she dreaded the most of all, she threw out the reminder that they would arrive in England just in time for the pheasant shooting.

The mention of shooting fired Roger. To walk again

over the plow, to stumble through the turnips, to feel the slap of the wind after many autumns in the East, to hear the rousing cry of "mark over," to wait for the whirring of twenty pairs of wings scudding over his head. All the sportsman that made up so large a part of one aspect of his character awoke in Roger, but as suddenly the excitement died down. The memory of Helmside recurred again.

"Who'll want to shoot with me?" he muttered.

"Everyone you ask, of course," Naomi protested.

Roger shook his head. "Not they," he muttered.

"Of course they will," she persisted, "you'll see. Try. Write the invitations now and the answers will be waiting when we get back to Zouche. When all these old friends of yours are delighted to welcome you back, then that will convince you that no one really believes you had a hand in —in—the disappearance of the memorandum."

She spoke vehemently. She could always so completely identify herself with the moment, that what she said relative to it rang absolutely true.

It was not until Roger was at the writing-table, not until he was telling her about old friends who had not missed the opening pheasant drive for years, that she realized what she had done. It was she who was plunging him in among former associations, among old recollections.

She all but cried out to him to desist, to come away somewhere else, anywhere: but she knew that no wandering would help now. The permanency of her power over Roger was at stake, that permanency was to be put to the test.

"In a week," she told herself anxiously, "I shall know how much I really am to him."

"Surely," she told herself, "love is enough—his for me —mine for him. Has he not told me so?"

CHAPTER XVIII

Roger had counted on leaving Venice within forty-eight hours after his sudden decision to go home, but, when he went to secure sleeping berths, he heard that as it was the time when all the rich Germans, who seemed to appropriate Italy as a holiday ground, just as they exploited her commercially, were hurrying back to the Fatherland, he must await his turn, so that it was not until nearly a week later that he and Naomi found themselves at Basle.

The delay had so fretted Roger that they had hurried along by the St. Gothard route, though Naomi had murmured something about a wish to stop at Lausanne that she might visit again the little town where so much of her childhood had been spent. Roger was under the impression that this was why she suggested the Swiss route in preference to the Mont Cenis, but though he apologized for depriving her of the little pleasure, he kept on.

In reality, quite another idea was at the back of Naomi's mind. If they journeyed through France, they must pass Aix, and she did not want to stop there. She had no wish to see her mother herself, still less did she wish Roger to see his mother-in-law amid the particular set which Mrs. Melsham would be sure to cultivate, or at the Casino, where the hazards of gambling always brought out her worst traits.

But at Basle they found a letter from Aimée to Roger. She and her aunt had been wandering in their turn. They had been passing from one to another of the less overcrowded Swiss mountain resorts, and now they had rented a solitary little *châlet* at Filisburg, just above Lucerne. Filisburg was only a few hours from Basle, and to Naomi it immediately presented itself as a respite, for her dread of Zouche, and the effect of life there on Roger, had grown

daily, so eagerly suggested that the least Roger could do would be to go and see his mother.

At first Roger demurred. . . . He wanted to see his letters at Zouche, he wanted to see Paul, he wanted to see Carson, but this time Naomi persisted.

"Of course, we must go," she declared. "Besides," she added, blushing softly, "you forget this will be my first visit as a daughter-in-law."

"Are mothers-in-law then so popular?" Roger scoffed; but one of the rare gleams of pleasure came over his face. For few things gratify a man more than cordiality between his wife and his own relatives. It makes what he vaguely lumps together as "things" more pleasant for him, and he never realizes the strain or the give and take it entails to adjust a middle way between two sets of feminine interests which in their very essence must needs be utterly opposed.

"She was so good to me at Zouche," Naomi maintained.

"*Ce que femme veut, Dieu veut,*" Roger declared, and then he added, "I suppose I had better go and see if I can get a motor to take us up to Filisburg."

"It would save time in the long run if you did," Naomi retorted, gay because Roger was gay, "and at the same time," she advised, "send a telegram to say that we are coming, and I will be ready in an hour."

They left Naomi's maid and the heavy luggage at Basle, they reached Filisburg just when the shadows were beginning to sweep up over the lake, lying in the valley below the little village, and they found Amabelle sitting on the veranda, watching for them, and tea, with Swiss honey, and *biscuit de Berne* awaiting them. Aimée was at the tea table, and as Naomi saw the girl a shade of uncertainty came into her manner.

She had not forgotten that at Zouche Aimée had been the only member of the family to display any open hostility, besides, the girl was fully grown up now, as she would have described it herself, and her bright clear eyes looked from Roger's face to Naomi's as if asking the newly married wife

why gray hairs were already showing about her husband's temples.

"You will stay a few days while you are here?" asked Amabelle almost wistfully.

But Roger was decided. He and Naomi must leave on the morrow in time to catch the "*rapide*" for Boulogne at Basle, and then, to explain his haste, he began to tell his mother once more of his urgent need to see Paul.

The eagerness, the anticipation had its usual effect on Naomi. It frightened her, dismayed her, and just to push it away, as one does interpose the first remark which comes into one's head between one's self and that which is unpleasant to hear, she asked a question about Paul's marriage.

"I consider I made that marriage," broke in Aimée, suddenly sitting up very straight and endeavoring to look vastly important.

"You! Pray, why you?" asked Roger lightly.

"Because if it had not been for me, Victoria would still be buried up to her neck in scruples, and Billy would be still tied down to that 'I have done it and must stick to it' engagement," the girl answered, and she rattled off a sketch of her interview with Billy and its final results.

Naomi laughed heartily. She was young enough, she was feminine enough, for any real woman is eternally a matchmaker at sight, to sympathize with Aimée, and for a minute or two she asked questions, and Aimée answered them, exceedingly pleased to find herself accepted as the *deus ex machina* of the Marketel marriage.

Then all at once Naomi looked over to Roger.

"What is it?" she faltered, seeing his gloomy face.

"How did Billy afford to go on that expedition if he had to put £2,000 into it?" Roger muttered.

"Don't you know?" Aimée exclaimed. "Billy had £2,000 sent to him."

"Sent?" repeated Roger.

"Yes, in two Bank of England notes, of £1,000 each. They were left at his rooms . . . the very sum he wanted."

"Curious!" commented Roger curtly. "Did Billy say who sent them?"

"That Mr. Buzby of his, of course!"

"Buzby," repeated Roger. "Aimée," and his voice rang with an imperative note, "are you sure Billy said Buzby sent them?"

"Quite," the girl answered.

"You mean Edward Buzby, the absconding trustee," Roger persisted.

"The same," Aimée answered, "only Billy put it differently. He spoke of him as the man who borrowed his money, and was in a hurry to pay it back."

Roger laughed disagreeably, he rose and went abruptly along the veranda, down the little steps, across the strip of pebble-strewn ground,—which Swiss notions labeled a garden,—and plunged into the pine woods beyond.

"What is wrong with his Highness?" asked Aimée pertly.

Naomi turned to her mother-in-law. The action was involuntary, and into both their minds came the remembrance of the hour in the Queen Anne room when Amabelle had warned her that Roger would be difficult to live with. But neither of them was a woman to cry out easily. They sat on, side by side, until Naomi felt she could get up and suggest that she would like to have a good view of the lake by the evening lights.

Aimée half rose to accompany her, but a look from Amabelle checked the girl, and Naomi went down into the pine woods alone. There was a little path, and she followed it, until she saw that it ended in a gap at the brow of the mountain.

That gap was carefully railed across, and leaning against the rails was Roger. Naomi hurried to him, she slid her hand through his arm.

"You," he said, hardly turning his head, and then, after a pause, he added grimly, "It's a good long drop down there."

That was what he saw. Neither the beauty of one of the most incomparable views in Europe, nor the gilding and

softening of the sunset glow, but just the height of his elevation, the drop into the lake below.

"Oh! Roger," protested Naomi, aghast.

"I'm not a coward, generally," Roger muttered, "but now I can understand the temptation of that," and he stabbed his forefinger downwards. "I think if I were certain nothing would come of Paul's discovery, I might almost be driven——"

"But something will come of it, something must," Naomi cried out. She pulled up as abruptly as she had spoken. She, wishing for discovery! Prophesying it! Again she was caught between the upper and the under millstones and ground between them.

"Naomi," Roger began, turning so abruptly that he jerked her hand out of his arm—"you heard what Aimée said?"

"What about?"

"Billy and his £2,000."

"Well?"

"Well! His statement that Buzby returned that money was a lie."

"A lie," she faltered. "How do you know?"

"Buzby was dead then."

"Dead!"

"Yes."

"Are—are you sure?"

"Perfectly sure!" Roger went on. "I know, because when Paul took over Victoria's affairs, for some reason or other he insisted on my being her trustee. I had to go into things to the very foundation, of course, and so I had to inquire about Buzby's whereabouts. He sailed on a tramp steamer for the Argentine, heard somehow he would be arrested at La Plata, and threw himself overboard five days before they got into port."

"Then he is dead!" Naomi exclaimed, her mind going back involuntarily to that other scoundrel who was reported to have passed away and was still alive.

"You see," Roger went on, "he couldn't have sent Billy that money."

"Then, where did Billy get it?" Naomi asked.

"That is exactly what I want to know," Roger retorted.

"What do you mean?" his wife gasped.

"Truth can be inconvenient."

"You don't think that Billy was deliberately telling a lie?"

"I was thinking that whoever stole the Chinese memorandum would be well paid for it," Roger answered defiantly.

Naomi drew back a pace. It was the first time that Roger had said in so many words that the thief might be one of his personal friends. But Naomi knew that ever since he had indignantly scouted the notion, when Carson first made it, the suggestion had been working in his mind, and spreading amid his thoughts, just as the virus of a disease spreads through the human frame.

She put up both her hands with a supplicating gesture.

"Don't suspect Billy," she implored, "don't! . . . It's so awful—so unlike you."

"Then let Billy explain," Roger retorted hardly.

"Billy can explain!" she persisted.

"Can he?" mocked Roger. "I'm not so sure."

"You don't mean you really think Billy took that money?" Naomi protested. "Impossible. It is impossible, Roger!" she clamored. "Why, even to think of him in such a connection is monstrous, unjust."

"Unjust," Roger echoed angrily.

He stepped back from his wife, and looked at her, as if she had suddenly arrayed herself amid his foes.

"Don't you want me to be cleared?" he asked roughly. "I had noticed before that you sometimes seem as if you don't really go with me. You might not want me to be cleared."

Naomi shrank away. They had gone on another step down the fatal incline. He was beginning to wonder at her attitude—next he would—what would he think next?

The possibility made her turn pale. Roger saw the ebb of color from her cheeks and construed it very differently.

"Dearest," he exclaimed, "have I been such a brute as that! I didn't mean to hurt you. But someone must have stolen that memorandum, somewhere the actual thief must be living, smiling, going along untroubled, while I . . . I . . . I am living in purgatory. Listen, dear," he hurried along, "suppose in my anxiety I do alight on the wrong man. He can clear himself in a couple of minutes and what is two minutes' disagreeableness compared to my weeks of hell? You," he went on, his indignation rising again, "you think of the injustice to my friends. What of the injustice to me? Do you never take that into consideration?"

"Roger," Naomi protested, "I think of it always. I think of it continually."

They had come to the deadlock where their conversation so often had recently led them. They stood silent, each of them feeling that this brooding hung as a black curtain between them, and then the tinkle of a little gong, coming with its trivial thin sound through the still night air, suggested to Naomi that she must go back to the *châlet* and dress.

CHAPTER XIX

EARLY next morning Naomi and Roger left Filisburg. The parting between the two women was affectionate. Though Naomi had made a determined effort to be cheerful, gay even from the time she came down to dinner until she was safe within the solitude of her own room, Amabelle was not deceived. Naomi was paying as big a price as Roger, she told herself, although she had seen that though it was the first time they had met after months of separation, the cloud had never once lifted from her son's face, that, even after her most determined efforts to recapture some of that intimate gaiety which used to characterize their meetings, Roger had stood out on the balcony of his room, staring into the darkness almost until the first flush of dawn lit up the snow-topped peaks around the *châlet*.

Once on their way, Roger's feverishness seemed to increase. It took an unexpected turn, for it fastened on the invitations he had sent as his first objective. By the answer to them, he would know how he stood in his neighbors' estimation, so without so much as waiting to catch a glimpse of Paul Marketel, who they heard was out of town until the following day, he and Naomi drove from Victoria straight to Liverpool Street Station and reached Zouche in the afternoon.

The day seemed to have adapted itself especially to the homecoming of the bridal pair. The beech trees—and in East Anglia the beeches take on themselves a feast of color—were all ablaze, the little wreaths of blue mist softened the distance, and yet hardly veiled it.

Littleport, with his best smile, was at the door awaiting them, and, since he felt that the homecoming should not be without its celebration, he had ordered the second footman to set every bell in the house ajingle.

Roger did not seem to hear the welcoming jangle, he had hardly a word to say to Littleport. He walked hastily through the hall towards the Chinese Room.

Naomi followed him. She never entered the Chinese Room if she could help it, since her mother's visit to Zouche, but she told herself that henceforth she must not shun it. Littleport had given her a lead there.

"I have just put the tea in the Chinese Room, my Lady," he said aside to her. For one moment Naomi did not understand, then she turned gratefully to the old man. "That was just like you," she said, "thank you."

She saw what he had meant to convey. The guilty avoid the locality of their crime—not so the innocent. It was the old man's understanding which had made him force them to begin their home life there.

Littleport had made all possible arrangements for their comfort; the tea table was drawn up to the fire, Roger's chair was on one side, and what Littleport himself would have described as "a nice chair for a lady" on the other.

The picture spoke of intimacy, of repose, but Naomi looked past it to the letters on the desk.

Roger went straight to them. Under normal conditions he would have had something to say to his wife about their homecoming, but now he had no thought for anything but these letters; they represented the touchstone of his Fate. That this was their first hour together in their home was not even present to his mind. He sorted out quickly the business envelopes and the circulars. Then he opened the others . . . one, two . . . three, four, five . . . they were all regrets—excuses, refusals. Naomi stood on the other side of the desk watching him; his lips set themselves with a thinner line, and she saw the hard look in his eyes.

He pushed two notes over to her with a cynical laugh. "Admiral Mainby regrets he cannot accept my invitation," he said. "He doesn't even trouble to invent an excuse; and he has never missed the opening day here since my mother came back to live at Zouche." He dropped the curt note on the floor as though it burned his fingers and went on, point-

ing to another: "This is from Victor Hempsworth, he and I were at Eton together. He's shot with me and I've shot with him ever since we had a gun apiece—he 'regrets that he has a previous engagement.'"

Naomi came up to her husband and laid her hand on his shoulder. "He might be engaged really," she faltered. "You didn't give them much time. You know shooting engagements are made so far ahead."

Roger shook his head, walked away, and went to the tea table.

"Come here," he called out savagely. "Sit down, let us have tea—at least we can eat and drink. You see what life with me will be like!"

That night, while they were having dinner, a messenger brought over a note from Annie Tune. Mrs. Tune, of course, had heard of the return to Zouche, and took the earliest opportunity of inviting Roger and his wife to a garden party she happened to be giving on the morrow.

The De la Hayes were at dessert when the invitation came. Naomi opened it and passed it quickly across to Roger. "Look at that," she began joyously, for her first thought was to set this off against the rebuffs of the afternoon.

Roger just glanced at the note, written on expensive paper of the newest color, and his lips curled.

"What is it?" Naomi asked quickly.

"Don't you understand?" he returned irritably. "It is very good of Annie Tune to ask us. I'll be bound she is thinking so herself, but I happen to know she'd sit down to lunch with a murderer if she thought all the countryside would talk about her doing it."

Naomi had never heard this bitter accent before—the disgraced man was speaking—the man wounded to the quick by what he knew (or imagined) other people might be thinking of him.

"Couldn't Mrs. Tune really want to see you?" she faltered.

"Want to see me," he exclaimed, and then he laughed.

Naomi rose. She had special trouble with her dress for

this evening, for she felt that if she failed to hold him tonight her case was indeed hopeless. The purple gown with the band of deep red round her waist set off her fairness. The white arms gleamed alluringly through the long folds of chiffon which veiled them, her neck and shoulders were bare but for the slender chain from which hung her favorite jewel: a blue-white aquamarine.

She pushed back the Venetian plate—she had ordered Littleport to use these plates tonight in order to recall to Roger's mind their Italian wanderings—and she noticed subconsciously how the flecks of gold gleamed against the mahogany of the table.

She went and stood behind her husband.

She leaned over him, apparently to pick up Annie Tune's note. In reality, the movement was a calculated though instinctive attempt to thrust herself—her warm, pulsating personality, her passionate heart—between Roger and his pain.

There was nothing of the wanton about Naomi, she would never appeal to the flesh for the gratification of the senses, but now, because she had all but come to the last ditch, she was driven to putting the power of her personality to the test. Was she, Naomi—the warmth of her—the beauty of her—the woman, the wife, the strongest thing in Roger's life, or was the thought of his disgrace more powerful than his love?

Roger sat on without moving. He did not even lay his hand over her hand—he did not even turn his head that his cheek might touch her arm. Just then, Annie Tune's invitation—the motive of it—the significance of it, was greater, nearer, than the presence of the woman who loved him.

"We had better put in an appearance tomorrow. If we don't go, it will be signing our own death warrant, if we do, people may say they don't want to be seen in my company," he muttered gloomily.

Naomi stepped back. She was glad Roger could not see her face. She in her own person had failed—she saw that.

"Shall I go and answer Mrs. Tune's letter at once?" she

commanded herself sufficiently to ask in a very quiet voice.

"Please do," said Roger briefly.

He pushed back his chair. He left untouched the fruit on his plate, but he drank the wine in his glass and though he was always abstemious, he filled the glass once again.

The next afternoon, Naomi went up early to get ready for Annie Tune's garden party. She carefully reviewed her dresses before she decided on the particular one she would wear—it was important that she should strike exactly the right note. When she was quite ready, she found that she had a few minutes to wait. She dropped into a chair, and sat with her hands in her lap, thinking. She put the truth before herself without evasion. On her side, her love for Roger had grown, and so also had grown her perception of the enormity of the thing that she had done. This perception had begun to haunt her in Venice, but since the return to Zouche, it had been hardly out of her mind, and as a result of this persistency, there grew up a new fear. Would the truth overmaster her? Would her inward upbraiding force her to convict herself out of her own mouth? Such things had happened before. For all she knew, having once walked in her sleep, she might do so again, might speak next time, and blurt out all the truth.

"Not that, not that," she murmured to herself.

With some temperaments, after confession there might follow that convenient makeshift known as "beginning all over again," but Roger would never be able to pass a sponge over the slate in that way. If his idol fell off the pedestal —it would stay on the ground—the pieces, to his mind, would not be worth the trouble of putting together.

Naomi knew this. She had often been dismayed by a certain quality of finality in Roger. "A thing either is or is not," he had once told her, and when she pleaded the extenuating circumstances, he had asked her almost fiercely if extenuating circumstances in any way made up for the lost ideal.

Naomi's dismal reflections had reached this point when her maid came in to tell her that the car was waiting.

She went downstairs trying to smile, and all the way to Annie Tune's house she purposely asked Roger questions about hedgerows, shelters, drives—all the miscellaneous items of the shooting season, that he might not have time to think of what was before him.

Annie Tune welcomed her friends at the open window of what she called her studio, principally because the room had a terra-cotta Venus on a pedestal in one corner, and a dozen uncertain sketches of the dear lady's own production on the walls.

"I always give my garden parties late in the year," she said as she shook hands, first with Naomi and then with Roger.

"Now confess," she went on skittishly, "you did think outside parties were over for this year."

"That makes it all the more delightful to find one's self wrong," returned Naomi, trying to answer in the same tone, but Roger looked grim, for as they entered the room he had heard his hostess remark in an audible aside (Annie Tune's asides were usually more audible than her direct conversation), "Yes, that is the new Lady de la Haye. I asked them on purpose last evening as soon as ever I was sure they had returned. It will help them, perhaps, if they are seen here. I like to strike a note—the individual note, and after all, I have known his mother——" and the voice trailed off into a mumble before they came to her. It is the present-day fashion to represent any well-dressed gathering as fundamentally malicious, especially by those whose only participation will be through the park railing, but though the temptation to a cheap witticism at another's expense is ever present, in no rank of life is there a greater disposition to help the less fortunate, above all to succor the courageous.

So now, though some of Mrs. Tune's guests might be ready to whisper among themselves, the general conclusion was that the new Lady de la Haye must have something sterling in her, or she would not have married at the precise moment she did.

Towards Roger, feeling was less kindly. His guilt seemed so certain, and his theft particularly treacherous.

There had been an informal conclave (at which, by the way, Annie Tune was not present) of the leaders of the county.

The local marchioness—a plump old lady with a lisp and such pretty blue eyes that for all her sixty years many a young girl envied them—called the tune.

"You see Amabelle de la Haye is a dear friend of mine," she had said with her undecided decision. And now, as Roger and his wife stepped on to Annie Tune's conventionally cropped lawn, the little old lady, with a scarf of ivory-tinted lace floating behind her, bustled forward.

"My dear," she began breathlessly to Naomi, a spot of pink in either soft cheek, "I am coming t-to call on you t-to-morrow."

Roger heard the eager greeting. He frowned. He understood. He was sure that even the cold civility of leaving cards had been debated. He stiffened for very pain. Up till now, Roger had been genial—gay; children went readily to him, and old people called him a "nice boy."

The little flurried lady put out her hand.

"Roger," she said, very deliberately, "have you heard f-from your mother lately? L-l-l-love your mother, Roger."

The tall man interpreted that again and read it to mean: "I consider you guilty, but I am going to tolerate you for your mother's sake."

He replied with yet more restraint and the plump-partridge little peeress tried another advance.

"What a b-beautiful woman your wife is," she said.

Roger half smiled at that, but the next moment the bitter thought flashed through his mind of what his beautiful Naomi would have to endure.

Meanwhile, with such a lead to guide them, the lesser lights were paying eager court to Naomi. She exerted herself to please—she must make a favorable impression on the people among whom Roger moved.

Someone invited her to explore the garden. Someone

else brought her a cup of wushy-looking tea: Annie Tune's tea always seemed to bear a resemblance to herself. It was never warm enough—there was generally too much milk in it, and nine times out of ten there was a pool in the saucer.

Naomi took the tepid tea cheerfully enough. Just as she replied generally to any remark which might be made to her, she saw Roger would never put out a finger to help himself—the more he was hurt the less he would propitiate. If anyone were to sway opinion it must be herself—and she hoped to make good progress this afternoon.

Before long, Mrs. Tune came breathlessly into view; and it was well that Roger did not hear her explain, as she hurried towards his wife, "I must see how that poor girl is getting along."

"Entertaining is so exhausting," she began as she pulled up and gave a wrench to the "creation" which sat so uncertainly on her head—"Don't you think," she went on, "that people are so much easier to entertain abroad?"

Naomi looked uneasily at the flurried woman. It was evident that Mrs. Tune's mind had at least looked up the fact that there was some connection between the new Lady de la Haye and what local phraseology called "them foreign parts."

"What a pretty garden you have," the girl began, and still to switch off her hostess's volatile mind, "What a pretty old path that is," she added, as she hastily glanced over a low box hedge.

"It is never damp—not even on the worst day," Mrs. Tune returned. "Come and see my fountain," she continued, and put her arm through Naomi's and walked her off without even waiting for an assent, and then the good lady went on to say that the fountain was her own taste, and she had chosen the design of three storks, each one standing on its left leg, to replace an old moss-grown basin.

"I hate old things just because they are old," she went on, airing another of her oft-repeated observations, and then, as

Naomi carefully dissented, just to provoke further assertions, Roger joined them.

That switched back Mrs. Tune's mind to its original connection.

"Do you know," she began to Naomi, "I have been thinking a great deal of that winter I was in Nice."

"Were you in Nice?" said Roger. "My wife passed some time there."

"Yes, I know; she told me she had," began Mrs. Tune.

"What year were you there?" Naomi had to ask.

"Let me see," Mrs. Tune debated, "it was—it was the year that big fat man was there——"

Naomi turned as if she would hurry out of the little inclosure back on to the lawn. Mrs. Tune was coming unmistakably to Strum. A little more, Naomi told herself, and she might be forced to admit that she had known the man.

She might have recollected, had she time to think,—but then, when one is in a panic it is exactly the time to think that is denied one,—that the Strum episode belonged to her first winter in Nice, when it pleased Mrs. Melsham to proclaim that her daughter was too young to go out, and therefore though Naomi might be known to the habitués of the Villa, she was unknown to the casual stranger on the Promenade des Anglais.

"Don't you remember him?" Mrs. Tune went on. "What was his name—something to do with water—or was it steam? I have it," she went on, and she looked up triumphantly.

"Hermann Strum."

"Hermann Strum!" exclaimed Roger.

"Yes," said Mrs. Tune. "I remember now, I saw him ever so often—twice at least, with that Frenchman who was staying with you in the summer."

"Armand de Rochecorbon and Hermann Strum together," Roger exclaimed, "you must be mistaken."

"No," said Mrs. Tune decisively, "I'm not, I'm sure it was that French friend of yours with Strum."

Naomi listened so petrified with fear that she was tongue-

tied, and then the little peeress came up to say good-by to her hostess, and whether they would or would not, she swept Roger and Naomi back into the lawn, one on either side of her, but at the first opportunity Roger touched his wife's arm.

"We must be going," he said briefly. Naomi nodded. The moment was well chosen from her point of view. Mrs. Tune had waddled back into the lawn, and with most of a hundred people looking on, Roger could not ask again about Strum.

There was of course a final flow of irrelevancies from Mrs. Tune, but at length Roger and Naomi found themselves in their own motor. Naomi sat back with a sigh of relief. But the car was hardly started before Roger turned on her.

"Did you hear what she said?" he asked.

"What who said?" Naomi returned.

"Annie Tune," he answered. "Surely you must remember. She said Armand was always about with a man called Strum."

"I think she narrowed it down to twice," his wife ventured.

"Twice is as many times too often," Roger retorted irritably. "You can't have forgotten that Paul wrote and said he had found out that the Chinese memorandum had been sold to the Olympic by a scoundrel named Strum."

"No," exclaimed Naomi, bitter on her own account for once, "I never forget that."

"Well, then," demanded Roger, "what was Armand doing walking along the Promenade des Anglais with a scoundrel like that?"

"It was ages ago," interposed Naomi weakly.

Roger did not reply. His wife glanced at him sideways. She was beginning to hope that her allusion to time, and the implication it carried with it that the Strum of that day need not necessarily be possessed of the reputation of the scoundrel of the present time, had soothed Roger, but the next moment she knew to what point his mind was working.

"I have told you before," he said, "that Carson is convinced that the memorandum was copied by someone in the house. Here is possibility number two."

"Surely," cried out Naomi, aghast, "you are not going to suspect Armand next?"

"I'll suspect anyone, everyone as I told you before," declared Roger roughly. "I don't care what I do to get at the truth. This afternoon must have shown you what people think of me. I can't sit still under such suspicion. I'll—I'll leave no stone unturned to clear myself. Carson nearly threw up the whole thing because I wouldn't let him come down and begin at Zouche. I was a fool. Why shouldn't he come?"

Naomi had not a word to answer.

Another stone had been pulled out of the defense she had built up about herself.

She looked miserably before her—however was it all going to end? Or rather could there be but one ending?

"Carson was right," Roger went on vehemently, "I must stick at nothing."

Naomi looked at him in dismay. He was escaping further and further from her. She was quiet for a few moments, and then almost timidly she laid her hand on his arm.

"Don't do anything hastily," she faltered.

Roger did not answer. Was the suggestion to dally not even worth a contradiction—or had he not even heard her plea? Naomi slipped back farther into the corner of the car. She looked at the swiftly passing hedgerows—they seemed to dip and bow mockingly, as if they said, "You see, you see, what a fool you were." A little more and the car swept through the gates and up the drive. When it pulled up, Naomi got out. She went up the steps into the house (her house at what a price!) and stopped in the hall to find out what Roger meant to do.

"I am going to telephone to Carson," he announced.

"No, no," she faltered.

"Why not?" he asked sharply.

"Because," she began—she was going to say, "Because it

would be of no use"—and stopped. What *could* she say?

"There," struck in Roger, irritably. "You see, you have no real reason. Why are you prejudiced against my going to Carson?"

"Did you not hesitate yourself?" she asked.

"That was when it seemed impossible that one of my friends could have a hand in the business. Now, when one hears what charming company Armand frequented—and when Billy gets £2,000 from people who could not have sent it . . ."

"Don't, Roger, don't be bitter," Naomi implored.

"Bitter," he commented harshly.

"Armand may have only met the—the man by accident."

"Then Carson will find out, and I shall feel reassured."

"Roger——" Naomi began.

He turned on her.

"Why do you want to stop me again?" he demanded fiercely.

She said nothing more, but looked at him piteously.

"There," he said, his sensitiveness touched at once. "You see, I am behaving like a brute again."

She slipped her hand into his. He held it a moment and then took his fingers away.

"You are going to telephone?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, "it seems the best thing to do, the only thing, in fact, that I can do."

He left her with that. She saw him go to the salon and then into the Chinese Room. He must have left the door open, for the next minute she could hear him calling up Carson's number on the telephone.

It was a long-distance call, so when Roger had asked for the number he wanted, he put back the receiver with such a click that the mere act betrayed his impatience and his nervous tension. It was evident that not only did he consider Annie Tune's chance observation of importance, but that, the more he thought of it, the deeper he was penetrated by its possible significance.

Naomi tried to think what would happen when Carson

was set on to Strum's trail. She recollected a clause in Paul's letter—an added word—which she had read at the time with a gasp of relief. Paul had mentioned that Strum seemed to have disappeared from the moment he left the office of the Olympic. At any rate, all inquiries so far had been fruitless. She had repeated that again and again to herself. "Strum has disappeared," she would mutter when she was alone. It had seemed such a safeguard—now, she saw that present conditions were not the immediate concern: it was things as they had been which primarily mattered.

Any detective put on the track with so definite a clue, would soon find out that in Nice, Strum lived by his wits, and there might be some record somewhere of money passing between him and Armand. Then, if Armand were called on to explain—what would he say? Or, proceeding in the other direction, the detectives might find out that Strum had been received at the Villa Paul et Virginie, and that Armand was a fellow-guest; then how could she explain to her husband why she had been silent? For a moment, in her extremity, she thought she might say that she had been shielding her mother, but that ray of hope only upheld her for an instant, and then at this point Littleport appeared. He carried a telegram on his salver.

"For me?" said Naomi, as the old man came up.

"Yes, my Lady."

She took up the envelope listlessly. She felt tired, as if she had been working hard. They were expecting Victoria and Paul, and the message might be to announce their arrival sooner than originally arranged. It takes a really unhappy woman either to fully rejoice at the happiness of a more fortunate sister or to fully resent it. Naomi caught pathetically at any vicarious piece of good fortune, and Victoria's well-being was particularly precious to her.

"Wait a moment, please, Littleport," she said, "there may be some new order about the car."

The old man murmured "very well." He drew back and watched her solicitously.

Naomi pulled the sheet out of the envelope. She glanced at it at once, and then let it drop.

"Not more bad news, my Lady?" cried out the old man, as he saw the color leave her face and a kind of ashen gray tint come up on it.

"Yes," she answered dully, and then she went on as if the mere act of speaking was difficult—"My mother is dead."

Littleport looked at her, and any words of sympathy he might be about to utter, froze on his lips. There was something so stony here that he blurted out instead—"Shall I fetch Sir Roger, my Lady?"

Naomi did not reply for a moment. She twisted the pink form into a tight roll, and then untwisted it. Within the house all was still, only through the doors leading to the Chinese Room came the steady tramping of Roger's footfalls. Something—perhaps the very monotony of the pacing—prompted her. She looked dully at Littleport.

"No," she said, "don't fetch him, I will go to him."

Littleport looked at her again. He had not been greatly impressed by Mrs. Melsham on the one occasion he had seen her, but now he was inclined to think she must have been a better mother than he would have supposed, since her only daughter seemed pretty well stunned at hearing the news of her death.

He gave Naomi another look of compassion and went out. When she was alone, she went through into the salon. She walked slowly, uncertainly, across the room. Her mother's death was a blow, but it was not grief that was making her falter, it was another—a new—uncertainty. How would this news affect the secret she was carrying? Would it facilitate discovery, or retard it? A less fundamentally honest woman than Naomi would have tried to conjure up some feeling of sorrow. Naomi had lost nothing, and she would not pretend she had.

She straightened out the telegram and began to read it again. It was from the hotel proprietor and was cold, not to say aggrieved, for there is nothing the management of

a hotel in one of the haunts of cosmopolitan fashion so keenly resents as the inopportune arrival of death—and from it she learned that Mrs. Melsham had been seized with a heart attack at the Casino. She died before she could be got outside the building. Her body was lying in the morgue and the authorities demanded the presence of the next of kin to complete all the legal formalities.

Naomi had just come to the end of that dreary message, set down more as an ultimatum than as a piece of information, when she heard the sharp ring of the telephone bell. Roger sprang to it at once.

"Yes, yes," she heard him begin excitedly, "who is it speaking?"

Then came a pause.

"Not at home," she heard Roger repeat blankly. "Not sure when he is expected?"

Carson was away—that one fact hammered itself into Naomi's brain. She gave a long gasp. The room began to whirl before her. The respite meant so much to her that for a moment she could hardly believe that it could be true. But the next moment Roger began to speak.

He must get into touch with Mr. Carson, he said, it was urgent,—it was imperative. His very vehemence seemed to strike Naomi as if it were a physical force. With an unreasoning impulse, driven as if she were leaving something fearful behind her, she hastened out of the salon on to the terrace, and then, almost running, down the steps through the walled garden, into the park.

"Mama is dead," she repeated to herself, as if that, said often enough, should drop a veil over the doings at the Villa Paul et Virginie.

She walked quickly along over the rolling stretch of green, and as she went, she began to realize that the closest link with her own personality had been snapped. "I ought to cry," she told herself, but there was nothing within her which would grieve at the death of a mother. She had not even any softening childish reminiscences to revive. Until she was eighteen, she had hardly seen her mother at brief

intervals, and then the little girl looked at the fashionable woman who occasionally came to the tiny house at Lausanne, as a fresh variety of school-mistress who concerned herself with questions of deportment and complexion, instead of with sums and English history.

Naomi walked on and on until she found herself on the outskirts of the park. There was a plank laid over the surrounding ditch there, and a woodman's hand-gate leading into what was known locally as a green lane.

Naomi walked across the plank. She could not go back yet.

As Littleport said, Roger must know, and yet she shrank from telling him. The news did not wholly surprise her. Mrs. Melsham had been threatened more than once with a heart attack. She had been warned to be careful, and responded by living more recklessly.

Naomi kept on her way down the lane. It came out close to the village, but just before it ceased to be a grass track and took on the dignity of a properly made road, two little white cottages stood out to catch the eye of the sun.

Amabelle de la Haye had built them. Each one was endowed with a little income. Each one was inhabited by an old woman who had been born in the village, and had passed the whole of her life there.

Naomi left alone, would have passed by silently. She did her duty by the village as far as she was able, but she had not yet come to the point of doing it easily. Her mother-in-law, when she was at Zouche, never thought of passing by a single cottage without a friendly word.

But now there was a bent old form standing by the little gate, waiting for her.

"Step in a moment, my Lady—do, love," suggested Grannie Sharp.

Naomi smiled one of those rare smiles which warmed her whole face. She was cheered to think that this old woman wished for her company.

She pushed open the gate—waited for Grannie to hobble back into her kitchen, and sat down on the chair assigned

to her. Naomi began with a cautious inquiry about the old woman's health. Mrs. Sharp suffered from an internal complaint—" My little old muck of a trouble," as she called it, and she dealt faithfully with the details of it. But when in the midst of a description as plain-spoken as it was voluble, she suddenly broke off, and leaning forward, put her knotted old hand on Naomi's shoulder.

" Why, my dear," she said, " you look almighty bad yourself. Don't take on so, my Lady. It's mortal bad to bear, but I have been through it myself. It always took me here," and she patted her lean bosom. " I knows what you feels like. Cold shoulder ain't easy to put up with whether it's turned on gentle or simple."

" My mother's dead," faltered Naomi, " I've just heard."

" That, too," cried out Mrs. Sharp. She reached out for her stick and turned sharply on it. " Go back home, love," she advised, " and see to your black. The Lord made mourning to give women something to think of, for fear if they hadn't it to keep their mind busy they would break their little old varmints of hearts."

Naomi rose. " I'll take your advice, Mrs. Sharp," she said. Once out of the door some memory of the old woman's story came back to her.

Roger must have told her. It was long ago—perhaps as much as fifteen years ago—that young Ted Sharp, the old woman's grandson, employed as an errand boy in the village shop, was caught helping himself from the till.

No prosecution followed—Amabelle saw to that. Ted was given another chance in Canada, but his grandmother drank her cup of shame to the last drop. She remembered that now, and remembered sympathetically how bitter it had been.

But what concerned Naomi was not sympathy, but the point of view. She had been told in so many words that there were people who pitied her at Roger's expense—pitied her—and she was guilty—at the expense of Roger who was innocent. She had just arrived as far as that when she saw Roger himself hastening to her.

"Naomi," he began, "I have been looking everywhere for you. Littleport has told me."

"Yes," she said, for she saw by his face what the old man-servant had said to him.

Roger slipped his arm within hers.

"My dear," he began, "what a brute I am. I've been thinking only of myself, and here you have been facing this blow all alone. Tell me exactly what has happened."

Very briefly, in difficult broken phrases, Naomi told him.

"Someone must go to Aix at once," she ended. "I should like to go myself."

"We will go together," he answered. "We can start early tomorrow—as early as you please, it is not too late tonight—we might get to London tonight—and then, of course, there's the midnight train. I'll telephone to Paul as soon as I get in."

His solicitude did what no trouble had been able to do—it broke her calm. She buried her head on his shoulder and broke into a passion of tears.

Roger held her silently. He thought a certain relief would follow, and at last, when she was quiet again, he gently persuaded her back to Zouche. But as she went, already a new difficulty was presenting itself. She knew but the barest outline of her mother's end—would there be anything to conceal about it? A kind of fear took possession of her, a dread, which was partly a trick of overtaxed nerves, partly the certainty that Mrs. Melsham, left without the restraining influence of her daughter, might have been making up for lost time, as she would have expressed it herself.

Anyway, Naomi knew that she wanted to go to Aix by herself—that her one endeavor would be to get there without Roger.

CHAPTER XX

Paul let himself into the quiet hall of his own house, and just looked up the stately staircase.

He meant to go up to the drawing-room and see if his wife was there, for to get to Victoria was always the first thought of his homecoming, and yet he paused because he had never lost the sense of Victoria's presence at the bend of the stairs or forgotten the future his imagination once pictured to him there. But before he could do more than glance upwards, Samuel came up to him.

"I have been watching for you, Sir," he began, "Monsieur de Rochecorbon is here, he's in the library."

"De Rochecorbon?" exclaimed Paul. "Why, hasn't he started for Pekin yet?"

"I think he wants to see you particularly, Sir. He wouldn't go upstairs; he said he'd wait until you came in."

Paul turned at once. Samuel evidently thought that Armand had come for more than a friendly chat, and Samuel was a man of perception.

"What can it be?" Paul asked himself, as he pushed open the white door of his own particular room.

It was, perhaps, illustrative of one aspect of the man that the dominant note in this room should be white, it was still more illustrative to those who would penetrate deep down into Paul's being that before a portrait of Victoria there should always be a bunch of red roses.

When Paul entered, Armand was contemplating these very red roses with the tolerant smile of the practical Gaul for the sentimental Anglo-Saxon.

"You ought to be a lover, *mon cher*, not a husband," the little man began as he shook hands with his host.

"Not at all," retorted Paul, "the lover only stands within the vestibule, the husband worships at the shrine itself. All

men make offerings when they go to the temple, or the gods veil their faces and are angry. Besides—what so appropriate as a rose—and a red rose? A rose in itself is the symbol of beauty—a red rose, of love for that beauty."

"*Mai foi,*" scoffed the Frenchman, "all this fantasy in spite of being a money-grubber."

"Or because I am one," contradicted Paul. "Finance," he went on, with a happy little laugh, "needs imagination. Imagination means seeing a little more than other people, and clear sight points out that, when all is said and done, it is the heart, not the hand, which rules this world."

For one moment a look—the look of those who perceive the Promised Land and may never enter it—came into Armand's face. The next moment he shrugged his shoulders; had he not his motor car, and for the most part his freedom? The rather featureless wife his family and hers had chosen for him, and to whom he was always scrupulously polite, would never prompt him to put roses before her picture—but, at least, she was a splendid mother—and for the rest, he had had his dream.

"*Voyons,*" he began, as if he were glad to change the conversation, "I wait especially for you."

"For me?" answered Paul. "What is it—has the trip to Pekin gone wrong?"

"No," said Armand, "there were a few difficulties, but they have all been adjusted. I made the crossing yesterday and would like very much to have one final word with Roger if I could see him."

"He is at Zouche," Paul explained.

"So the thing I came for especially was to see if I couldn't get at old Chi Lung," wound up Armand, after he had put a few questions relative to Roger and heard Paul's answer. "I find that there are all kinds of formalities when one gets well away from Pekin, and that when the powers that be don't fancy the look of a stranger, if he does not possess a permit, they lock him up in a cage until some lazy old mandarin makes up his mind whether the rest-cure is to go on indefinitely or no. That is not an idea *qui*

une sunte aux jeux and as his Excellency can level all the rough places, and make all things Celestial smooth if he will, I came to town especially to see him."

"He is away!" Paul answered.

"How do you know that?" asked Armand sharply.

"Because I wanted to see him tomorrow myself," Paul said. "I wrote to Portarlington Square and asked for an interview on urgent business—and I heard by return that the old man wouldn't be back this week."

"I heard the same when I called on him myself, an hour ago," Armand answered, "that is why I came on here as quickly as I could."

"Came on here?" repeated Paul, for he saw there was something more behind, "as quickly as you could—what do you mean?"

"This," said the little Frenchman, and for once he was not the mercurial individual of ordinary occasions, but an astute man of the world, putting several trifles together to make one important whole, "that you said the last time when you and I talked together, that the ways of le cher Chi Lung troubled you."

"Yes," said Paul, "you mean about the Chinese memorandum. He has always seemed to draw back, rather than to hasten, to help Roger."

"I have had such thoughts myself," Armand went on. "The Celestial moves by devious ways, it is well always to remember that. I remembered that, and so I came here."

He waited a moment and looked up at Paul. The big man had hardly said a word. He had not put a single question as to what had happened when Armand called at Chi Lung's house. It was inconvenient to one who loved a dramatic flourish, as De Rochecorbon did, but the more things looked as if they might grow serious, the fewer, always, became Paul's words.

"*Eh bien*," continued Armand, when he saw that if a crescendo there were to be, he must mount to it all by himself, "as I tell you I presented myself at his Excellency's house, and I heard the same fairy story about not being at home."

"Fairy story! How do you know that?" Paul asked.

"Because with my own two eyes I see the Marquis Chi Lung drive up in a taxi."

"The old man himself," Paul exclaimed incredulously.

"Himself and no other," Armand affirmed.

"Are you sure?" Paul went on.

"Sure," repeated Armand, "as certain as I am here."

"You think he denied himself purposely, first to me and then to you?" Paul asked. "Why should he do that? Is there any connection between the two denials, or is it just a mere coincidence and the old man didn't want to be bothered to receive any foreign barbarians at all?"

"Do you think that Chi Lung ever forgets we are both Roger's friends?" Armand answered.

"Then you would put it down to a further development of procrastination?" said Paul.

"Precisely."

"Phew," whistled Marketel, "that means, if you are right, that he is not working to help us, but to hinder us."

"Parfaitement," declared the little Frenchman.

Paul reflected a moment. On the one hand was the old Chinaman's silence, his withdrawal; on the other was his affection for Roger, his veneration for Roger's father. Paul had a long experience of the world and so he was loath to impute the less estimable motive. It is only the narrow who for ever hurry to put the worst construction on a circumstance: those who live the larger life, and live that life generously, are always ready to give the benefit of the doubt because they know that in nine cases out of ten there is no doubt at all, only a shadow which might be mistaken for one.

Paul applied this observation now. He came back to a point he had made before.

"The old man might really be seeing no one," he reiterated.

"Not at all," contradicted Armand. *"Voyons, mon cher,"* he went on, "why can his Excellency receive a

scoundrel when he hasn't time for an honest man? I saw with my own eyes. Directly after his Excellency's taxi followed another one with old Fu Yang in it, and beside old yellow face was seated—who do you think?"

"How should I know?" Paul asked.

"*Mon cher,*" went on Armand, "it was—*ma parole d'honneur,* it was—that *espèce de chien,* Hermann Strum."

"Hermann Strum," exclaimed Paul. He looked at Armand and repeated the name. The little Frenchman nodded. He was delighted that at last his information should have disturbed Paul's serenity. "Yes," he said, "it was he—I know him again."

"Then," said Paul quickly, "you have seen this fellow Strum before."

"Yes, I met myself with him once—in society."

"In society?" repeated Paul, "but the fellow is a low blackguard. Where did you see him?"

"At Nice," answered Armand, "in the 'ouse of a lady. It was evident he came under false pretenses."

"How long ago?"

"Three—no, four years ago."

"What happened?"

"There was a scene—he tried to blackmail a woman."

"What woman?" Paul asked.

Armand turned with an expressive gesture. "Why, of course," he began, and then he stepped back, he shut his lips tight and dropped his eyes. He had been going to say—"Why, of course, Mrs. Melsham," and had just recollected in time that he had given Naomi his word never to mention that episode at the Villa Paul et Virginie. "*Pardon! Je regrette,* I cannot tell you," he went on. "This blackguard was—how do you say it?—a card sharper. He was there only till he was found out. It is not for me to blacken *cette dame* by speaking of her in such a connection. I gave my word to the lady never to mention her name with the episode."

Paul nodded. A word given must be a promise respected. He tried another trick.

"Will it surprise you to hear," he said, "that this Hermann Strum was the thief who sold the Chinese memorandum to the Olympic?" Paul answered.

The effect on Armand was electrical.

"*He* sold it—this Strum?" the little man gasped, "and I see him myself driving up to the door of our Chi Lung. I saw his Excellency look out to make sure that he arrives."

Armand took a quick turn down the room.

"The plot thickens, *mon cher,*" he began excitedly, and perhaps his instinct for piecing facts together might have led him very near to the truth, but that at that very moment Victoria entered precipitately.

"Paul," she began, and even when she saw Armand, she hardly paused to greet him, "Roger has just rung up. They are in trouble again. Mrs. Melsham is dead—she died suddenly at Aix,—Roger and Naomi are coming to town tonight."

Paul gave vent to an exclamation of dismay. Armand did a curious thing—he made a quick movement as if he were wiping out something—and then, after the three of them had talked a little longer about Roger, and he had heard something about the admiration that both Paul and Victoria felt for Naomi, Armand rose to go. He made his farewells and decided that in the matter of local introductions a letter to the British and French Ministers at Pekin asking them to obtain certain permits there, was at least a good second best to Chi Lung's personal introduction. The little man bowed himself out of the room and out of the house. He was glad he hadn't mentioned Mrs. Melsham's name, just because she was dead, and the generous are silent when they cannot speak well of those who are gone. But no thought of Mrs. Melsham in connection with the theft ever came into his mind; indeed, it was established later that he did not so much as know of her call at Zouche. Armand had rushed off to the smoke room to write to his wife about the baby and his wonderful tooth, and neither Naomi nor Lady de la Haye had felt inclined to enlarge on the visit.

But as soon as Armand had gone, and as soon as Paul had ascertained that Roger and Naomi were coming by train, not by motor, Marketel turned to his wife—"It's five o'clock now," he said, "Roger does not arrive until eight-thirty."

Victoria turned to her husband with a smile. "You mean you are going to try to see old Chi Lung," she said.

"I mean," answered Marketel, "that I intend to see him. If they tell me that he is not at home, I shall insist on going in and waiting until he sees fit to say that he has returned. The process may take time, but if I wait until midnight I'll have this Strum business out with Chi Lung."

"It is all very strange," said Victoria slowly.

"It's more than strange. The old man is playing a deep game—what game? that is what I intend to find out." He walked to the door, paused there, and looked back at his wife.

"If I'm not back in time, you'll go to the train, won't you, dear? And tell Roger what is delaying me?"

Victoria answered readily and Paul set off to Portarlington Square in a passing taxi—he wouldn't even wait for his own car.

Paul devoted the few minutes occupied by the drive to thinking over the situation. Three points were clear. The Chinese memorandum had been copied at Zouche, it had been sold to the Olympic by Hermann Strum, and lastly, there evidently must be some form of communication between Chi Lung and Strum. Paul fastened on this. He was asking himself what connection there could be, and then a thought came into his mind, an idea which was often to come back to him during the next few weeks. Had Strum a hold over his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung? Had he been able to put some pressure on the special envoy from China (Paul knew that Chi Lung's career had not been without its vicissitudes—twice he had been disgraced, and twice reinstated) and had Strum thus obtained a sight of the Chinese memorandum? Then, suddenly, he let down the

window and told the taxi man to pull up. It had occurred to him that it was inadvisable to herald his coming and so he entered the Square on foot. It was long and narrow. A strip of grass and the regulation shrubs took up the center space; at the far end, stretching across the head of the Square, the houses were the largest, and the one in the very middle was the residence of the special envoy from China.

He had taken it over just as it was, and as Paul walked towards it he was wondering what the Celestials, with their love of the primary colors, would think of the dingy shade of chocolate with which its front was painted—when he saw the door open.

Chi Lung's secretary came out on to the steps and behind him followed a big, fat, loose-limbed individual.

"Hermann Strum departing," said Paul to himself.

He could see that the Chinaman was behaving with studied incivility, he waited until the secretary shut the door, then arranged his pace so that Strum—he was sure it was Strum—and he must cross each other.

The big man came along uncertainly—furtively. Had the Square not ended in a cul-de-sac it looked as if he would have taken any turning rather than face so much as one fellow wayfarer. As it was, there was nothing for it but to keep on, unless he turned directly about, and a man of doubtful character rarely ventures to do that. To turn one's back without a qualm means a clean record, otherwise it might occur to some onlooker to cry "Stop thief," and a policeman on the scene implies an investigation into antecedents.

Therefore, this loose-limbed, fleshy man decided that he must face Paul Marketel, even when his perfect memory for a face once seen assured him that it was the well-known financier. When they were all but abreast, Paul swerved, so that for an instant they directly faced each other. The meeting lasted but a matter of seconds but it gave Marketel time to see that Strum was only keeping control of himself by a strong effort of will.

"Whatever took place in there, hasn't been over pleasant for you, my friend," he thought.

The next moment he decided that "pleasant" was too mild a term altogether.

"You are absolutely piebald, Strum," he said grimly to himself. "I wonder what screw his Excellency has been turning."

Strum called himself by a German name and claimed the Fatherland for his birthplace, but there was evidently a mixed stream in him—a half-caste always goes white all over when he is angry—white in streaks and patches when terrified—Paul knew this.

He rang the bell sharply and anticipated the English man-servant by saying that he knew his Excellency was within, and that he did not mean to leave until he had seen the Marquis Chi Lung himself.

"Will you step in here, Sir?" said the man, neither denying nor affirming, as he opened the door of one of the anterooms. But Paul was not going to be side-tracked into any back-parlor as he called it.

"I will stay here," he returned, and his glance intimated that he could thus keep most of the doors and the staircase in view.

"Very good, Sir," said the man-servant, who evidently knew when to argue and when to refrain.

Paul, standing up very straight, very stiff, watched him go through the folding doors at the back of the house. Marketel was pretty confident that though he might be kept waiting, he would see Chi Lung in the end.

It is the Celestial habit to meet resolution with a concession more apparent than real, so, remembering that, Paul felt that his difficulties would be by no means over even if he did reach his Excellency's presence. None the less it was a surprise when he suddenly saw the old man in person coming towards him.

Paul put his hands together, and inclined his body in the correct Oriental fashion. Chi Lung did the same. Then the slanting eyes looked up ironically.

"Oh, Man of Money," the old Chinaman began, "is it to guard treasure so grown into your bones that you must needs play watch-dog on my doorstep?"

"It is not to guard your Excellency," Paul retorted bluntly, "it was to circumvent a second evasion."

"There are times and seasons for deaths as well as births," retorted Chi Lung.

He led the way down the hall and then opened the door into what had been the dining-room. It was hung now with crimson curtains—crimson is the Chinese color for good fortune—otherwise the room was bare of furniture save for a couch of Empire design and a round table, but the folding doors were half open and they gave a glimpse of a back room, draped in the same way, but rendered homelike—that is, homelike from a Celestial point of view—by a big Chinese stand, with sheets of red paper, little slabs of India ink, and other Oriental writing materials on it, and by little squat cushions tucked against the wainscoting all round the walls.

His Excellency shut the communicating doors with so decisive a bang that he seemed to be thrusting out any possibility of an intimate conversation between himself and this big masterful Englishman.

"Be seated, Honorable Guest," Chi Lung began, and he waved his hand to the sofa, placed—as Paul did not fail to remark—so that the light from the two windows must fall on anyone occupying it.

"But, your Excellency, won't you take the sofa yourself?" Paul objected.

"You think these aged limbs tremble already?" Chi Lung returned. "Truly, they are but shrunken skins covering weary bones, but they will still bear the weight of this declining frame."

Paul could only bow. The Celestial had out-manœuvered him—to protest further would be to indorse the suggestion of decrepitude. So he had to take the sofa and thereby expose his face to the light, while Chi Lung carefully backed into the shadow. There followed a silence. The old China-

man stood with his chin almost on his chest, his hands tucked each into the opposite sleeve. He neither looked up nor moved, and it came to Marketel that if anyone were to speak—he must begin—Chi Lung never would. Let alone the innate partiality of the East for silence, the axiom that the wise let the adversary speak first in order to learn from his own mouth how to answer him to his disadvantage, is nowhere better understood than in the land of the Blue Gown. Besides, Chi Lung was in the strong position of knowing—Paul in the weak one of wanting to know.

"Your Excellency," said Paul at length, "I am not going to begin by complaining of the evasion to which your secretary treated me."

"He but obeyed the words of my mouth," the old man returned loftily.

"But I am going to begin," Paul went on steadily, for he was not to be turned from his purpose by any bland admission, "by telling you that I know that Hermann Strum has been here—that I am pretty sure that I saw him come out of your door just now."

"Your reasoning is good," was Chi Lung's unexpected answer. "You looked on the man's face—tell me, what did the form of it say to you?"

"The man looked a thorough blackguard."

Chi Lung came a step nearer and bowed.

"Oh, Man of Money," he said, and Paul could not be sure whether he spoke in earnest or in irony, "I rejoice. Your far-sweeping mind confirms the judgment of my own wits. To me he has a face as evil as that of a pirate from Formosa."

"There wasn't much of the truculent pirate about him," Paul answered. "When he passed me, he looked about as frightened as a man could do."

"There are other ways of making a man feel the weight of a stone than by dropping it on his toes," his Excellency retorted, and regardless of Paul's presence, he gave way to a prolonged chuckle, and then permitted himself to take snuff liberally.

Paul began to think that whatever the habitual relations between Strum and the old man might be, the Chinaman had at least been the master on this occasion, but he never guessed that the old Celestial, with those wonderful underground ways of gaining information which are developed to a fine point by those of his race, had his finger on the key to one of those international mysteries which are hushed up precisely because they are so significant. The undoing of Marie Antoinette, whether she was innocent or guilty, was connected with a pearl necklace. There had lately been a modern equivalent, known to the secret police of two great empires as the theft of the Princess Goeristadt's diamonds. The case had a lady in it of course, and a near relative of a crowned head. There was also a more humble individual who played the part of a go-between and, when the moment seemed propitious, endeavored to extort large sums by way of blackmail. But the tool had reckoned without a certain German organization which, though it was installed in a single house in a quiet by-street, had tentacles as long as the strands of a spider's web. A careful bait lured him out of Germany, and, once in Russia, he was pounced upon, tried on a manufactured charge under carefully manipulated conditions, and sentenced to lifelong imprisonment in a certain snowbound fortress. Eventually he escaped, and perhaps he was so infatuated by his own cleverness in getting free that he was foolish enough to think he had covered up his tracks and might return to his old trade. But he forgot one particular enemy, and the one individual left out of a serious calculation is apt to be the one person who counts.

When Chi Lung was sent to Europe on his first mission, he had never been out of his own country before, and as soon as he reached Berlin a certain big burly nab, with loose limb and pale eyes, was introduced to him, nominally to serve as his European secretary, really, as a species of bear-leader on ceremonious occasions.

Strum—less fat in those days—was masquerading as a cavalry officer, and expected to exploit the Celestial under

the pretense of helping him, and when he saw that it wasn't as easy as he supposed, endeavored to implicate the Chinese envoy in what might have turned out to be a most damaging business. Chi Lung extricated himself—and never forgot. If it had been necessary to expend his last penny he would have done it to keep his enemy in sight. When the Goeristadt diamonds affair was whispered about discreetly he could have proclaimed the identity of the go-between, yet it was characteristic of the Celestial that though he had waited a dozen years for his opportunity, he was satisfied that a Russian fortress would see to his revenge better than he could see to it himself. Then came the evasion, after something like five years of imprisonment, and Chi Lung knew that Strum had got out of Russia before it was known to anyone but the officials concerned.

Such criminals always make for London.

When Chi Lung returned from Zouche, he heard that not only was his enemy in England, but that he had suddenly become possessed of money, and that he had been seen visiting the offices of the Olympic Press Agency. A less astute man than the Marquis would have denounced the international blackmailer at once—the old Chinaman played a cat and mouse game. Though Paul never knew it, it was thanks to one of his arrangements that Marketel got on the tracks of Strum and his Olympic business. It was equally like him and his methods that instead of trying to find out what Paul had discovered, he waited to be told, and therefore declared that he was out of town. The information came in a letter from Roger himself—a *verbatim* copy of what Roger had heard from Paul, and the old man had received it that very morning. He did not lose a minute—he sent for Strum, and made it plain that if the blackmailer delayed his confession for even an hour he would put the police on his track.

His Excellency had previously established several important things with regard to the theft of the Chinese memorandum. He knew where it had been stolen, who sold it to the press: he had a vague idea that Naomi knew more

than she had revealed, but the link he wanted to join up was the precise manner in which Strum got the copy of the memorandum from Zouche to London. Then his Excellency heard of Mrs. Melsham—she was his agent, Strum affirmed—he and she together had engineered the whole affair. Whether he did not know that Naomi had done the actual photographing or whether it was that at last some faint spark of chivalry glimmered in the dark places of this bully's mind, who knows, but at any rate he said nothing of her share in the matter. It is even possible that he thought she might be more useful to him exonerated than compromised. There is such a thing as killing the goose which lays the golden eggs, and Strum was not the man to forget that. However, he speedily learnt that he was to have no further opportunity of pursuing his peculiar trade in England. Chi Lung offered him a choice of alternatives: Strum must leave London that very night, or he should be denounced to the authorities on the common law charge of stealing the Goeristadt diamonds, which would mean extradition to Germany, but if he elected to leave England he must go to the place Chi Lung designated, and his Excellency, for reasons best known to himself, chose Teheran.

All this was unknown to Marketel, and Chi Lung mentally glanced at it with the double satisfaction of having done an adroit thing, and having outwitted the Englishman.

"Your Excellency," Paul observed, "your own book says the virtuous must not consort with the wicked lest vice go out of the one and virtue flow from the other. Strum is an evil man, I tremble lest such an overflow of wickedness might splash dark blots even on to your Excellency's stainless tablet."

"Your solicitude comforts me," retorted Chi Lung, turning the shaft aside. "But I am not the first who started out to find a diamond and picked up a splinter of glass."

"In this case, so long as the glass did not lacerate your Excellency's hand—or his foot—surely all is well," answered Paul.

"There are other hands than mine, O Learned," the

old man answered quickly, "there are other feet than mine and they can bleed also."

"Whose members are bleeding now?" Paul demanded sharply, for it occurred to him that all this imagery was not merely Celestial love of verbal display, but had a point hidden beneath it—"and whose hands," he went on, "strewed glass in the path of the virtuous?"

His Excellency looked up and smiled blandly. "There are many thieves, and here and there an honest man," he remarked.

"Your Excellency," Paul demanded, and he got up swiftly and stood before the little old man, "do you know who sold the Chinese memorandum to the Olympic? A straight answer, if you please."

"And why," asked the Marquis Chi Lung, "should my tongue make economy with breath? Lo, was it not the evil-minded one who has just left my door?"

"Hermann Strum?"

"If that is how you call him, your certainty confirms my poor opinion."

"Then why was he received in your house?"

"Hermann Strum had that to offer which was of value to me, the least of the servants of the Sons of Heaven."

"You have just been buying information from him?" Paul exclaimed.

"No," retorted Chi Lung. "This worthless one spoke, and he of the many pounds of flesh listened."

"I have no right to inquire into your private concerns," Paul went on, "but I must ask you—did that man come on anything connected with Roger's business?"

The old man put up his claw-like fingers and laid them on Paul's arm.

"Go softly," he expostulated, "he who hurries down the road often trips in the rut, he who goes deliberately steps aside, but when your mind is well furnished, why should not your feet conduct you to your yamen?"

"You mean, why do I not put the police on the track?"

"Even so."

"We want a vindication, not a scandal," said Paul. "But I have more than half a mind to take your advice."

He stood frowning and thinking. At the first glance, it seemed the obvious thing to do. Of course it had occurred to him before, yet though to copy a confidential paper might be low and dishonorable, it could not be ranked as a case of common thieving, and a bungling investigation might defeat his object for years.

"This is a case for the zeal of Roger's friends," he said after a pause.

The old man made no effort to combat the statement. Perhaps he meant to imply that the confidential part of the conversation was at an end, for he went to the door and, opening it, clapped his hands smartly.

A native servant entered with a tray of glasses and a bottle of cordial—it was a customary Eastern courtesy, and Paul poured a little of the syrup into a glass, and then motioned the man away.

"Has Roger drunk of the honey dew until he is sick?" Chi Lung inquired abruptly.

"Roger is sick at heart—but not with happiness," Paul answered, "it is with hope delayed."

"And the lily-flower—has he found that the hours do not go faster for her presence?" the old man asked next.

"No one can help Roger as his wife can," Paul returned.

"Then Roger's eyes still but see the peach-blossom as the dawn sees the budding flower in the first flush of the morning?" the old man asked.

Paul gave up metaphor—it had been no slight effort to his directness to keep it up so long.

"Lady de la Haye is as fine a woman as a man can hope to have for a wife," he said bluntly.

"Lo," retorted Chi Lung, "is it indeed friendship which sets the price so high on the possession of another," he returned abruptly and let his suavity go. "Roger turned to the pink and white face," said his Excellency malevolently, "Roger ignored the friend of long years, Roger laid

his life at the feet of lightness and forgot the wisdom of him who had grown old loving him."

"A man must cling to his wife," put in Paul.

"And has this—this possession that Roger has taken to his heart brought him happiness?" asked the old man.

The big Englishman shook his head.

"Ah," cried out Chi Lung, "then tell Roger this from me—There is always a center space, even in the box of a hundred lids, and when one gets there, one does not find a diamond, but only a pinch of dust. Tell Roger to recollect this. Tell him to stay at home and take counsel with her of his house. Tell him——"

"Roger is coming to London tonight," Paul interrupted.

"Here, so soon? Though his feet did not pause, not even to step across this threshold when he went by to his house."

"He will not pause now, your Excellency," Paul answered. "He is only on his way through London. His wife is in great trouble—she has heard this afternoon that her mother is dead."

"Dead!" echoed Chi Lung.

"Yes," said Paul, "Mrs. Melsham died suddenly at Aix."

"When did her breath leave her body?" the old man asked.

"Yesterday," answered Paul, "that is, as far as I can make out."

Chi Lung tucked his hands back into his sleeves.

"He who reckons without ill luck reckons without Fate," the old man remarked. "This poor servant thought he had displayed wisdom—he looked for revelations and lo!—the great book is suddenly closed."

Paul rose abruptly.

"Your Excellency," he said, "you have something at the back of your mind—I am a plain man and I cannot follow you, but if your Excellency knows anything that can help Roger, I beg of you to tell me. Surely," he went on, his vehemence rising, "your old friendship with the De la Hayes demands no less."

Chi Lung came round the table and again the yellowed old hand fastened on his big muscular arm.

"The Great Master," he said, "oftentimes spoke of Faith, but oftener still he discoursed of Patience—recollect, they are the twin children of Wisdom, and forget not that their elder brother is Truth."

"I don't follow, your Excellency," retorted Paul obstinately.

"Then," said Chi Lung, "take this for your counsel,—Chi Lung has not forgotten—Chi Lung has not slumbered when he should have pursued, he is but cautious, for his many years have taught him that to pluck an unripe fig is to taste but its harsh skin: and recollect, O man with a mind that would hurry as the fire engine hurries along the road—that when the hour is propitious, when the sun is high in the heavens—then much shall be revealed that will astonish your barbarian ears."

The old man drew back as he finished speaking. He inclined his old back until it bent well towards the ground, and then raising himself, he faced Paul Marketel with a bland smile.

Paul understood. His Excellency had marked out his position. When Chi Lung considered that the time had come, he would speak,—but not before.

Paul looked at his watch. Roger's train was due in half an hour. He explained that he must hurry away if he was to be in time to meet Roger on the platform, and the old Chinaman let him go without so much as making a pretense of detaining him.

CHAPTER XXI

Paul Marketel hastened from Portarlington Square down to Liverpool Street Station, and arrived at the platform just as the Colchester express was due. Victoria was there before them and they had no difficulty in finding Roger and his wife. Victoria no sooner saw Naomi than she drew her aside. The girl looked something more than ill. She looked as if she were overweighted to the breaking-point and in addition the blue eyes were furtive, and now and again a hunted expression came into them. This, Victoria could not help telling herself, was fear, not grief, and then she recollected having heard a whisper of Mrs. Melsham's gambling propensities.

"Is she not afraid that something worse has happened at Aix than she has been informed of?" Victoria asked herself. Though she did not know much, she did know a little about the sequences which sometimes followed unrestrained gambling on the Continent.

The idea remained in Victoria's mind all through the hurried meal which followed at a certain hotel near Charing Cross. They had all four of them driven there to be close to the station, and so that Naomi might rest until the last moment. Though it was in Paul's mind, though it was hardly ever absent from Roger's mind, for five minutes together, no mention was made of the Chinese memorandum, as long as a waiter remained in the overfurnished little private sitting room, but when the coffee was on the table, and Naomi had moved aside to open the window, saying she felt oppressed—Roger put down his cigarette.

"Any news?" he said insistently, but in a low tone, to Paul.

"Yes! I saw Chi Lung just before I came to meet you," Paul answered. "I can't make out the old man. I suppose

you really believe, like your mother, that he is a devoted friend of the family?"

"Absolutely," said Roger.

"H'm! According to his own account, he owes you both an undying debt of gratitude. Well, doesn't it strike you as curious," went on Paul, "that he seems so little anxious to help? Look at the facts. Ever since the theft of the memorandum Chi Lung has opposed objections, scruples, and delays to every investigation Carson and I have started."

"But why should he want to hinder us?" asked Roger meditatively.

"Ah! If I could answer that, we might be able to explain many other things. It's like one of those irritating toys we used to have when we were children. Do you remember? That box they called a Chinese Puzzle. Hammer it how you liked and where you liked, it wouldn't open for all your battering; but put your finger by chance on the right spring, and round would go the hinge and every side of that blessed box revolved showing daylight through. This business of yours is like that," Paul added, bending forward and touching Roger's arm. "A Chinese Puzzle! And we sha'n't see daylight through it till we have touched that spring."

"And you think Chi Lung could help us to put our finger on it?" queried Roger.

"No, I believe Chi Lung has had his finger on it all the time, and is determined that no one shall come near it," answered Paul.

"But, Paul, that's impossible," exclaimed Victoria, who had been listening silently but intently. "You know he is in disgrace in Pekin, what has he to gain from any concealment?"

"There you beat me," admitted Marketel. "It is difficult to reconcile his motives and his interests with his conduct, but," appealing to Roger, "your mother has often spoken to me of the Oriental peculiar aptitude for—what she called —mental jiu-jitsu."

"Yes, that's true; still—I can't believe that Chi Lung really has a hand in the business."

"Well, it has taken me weeks to get at him, and even then I managed it only through an accident," Paul retorted, and he thereupon proceeded to give a detailed account of his interview with the old Chinaman. "There are lots of things which want explaining," he finished up. "How does Chi Lung happen to know a man like Strum? What did he mean by his metaphorical allusions to 'glass strewed in the path of the virtuous' and to 'other hands and feet bleeding through a splinter of glass which they had mistaken for a diamond'?" And as he finished, Paul looked first at Roger, then at his wife, finally at that figure in black gazing not at him, but out into the glimmering street as if to emphasize its detachment. But if an accusation of seeming indifference might have been brought against Naomi, Roger was eager enough. His eyes never left Paul's face, his cigarette went out, yet before Marketel ended, his training showed him the practical result of the interview.

"We are not one step farther along," he declared bitterly.

Naomi turned suddenly about, and for one moment Victoria was utterly puzzled—there was relief on the face of Roger's wife, joy, anything but disappointment.

"How did you manage to corner Chi Lung after all?" questioned Roger.

"Ah! that was really a piece of unexpected good fortune," Marketel answered. "Armand came to see me this afternoon. It appears he, too, had been trying unsuccessfully to see Chi Lung in order to get certain information from him, and was just leaving Portarlington Square—after having been told that his Excellency was out of town—when he saw two taxis, closely following one another, drive up to the old man's house. Chi Lung stepped out of the first and Fu Yang marshaled Strum out of the other. When Armand had sufficiently recovered from his astonishment, he came to tell me what he had seen."

"Did Armand explain how he came to know Strum by

sight?" There was a curious hardness in Roger's voice as he asked the question.

Paul noticed nothing, but Naomi understood. Her husband still suspected one of his most intimate friends. Mrs. Tune's chance remark had fallen on fruitful ground. She came back towards the table, in her eagerness to hear Paul's reply.

"Oh, yes, he met him in Nice at one of the villas there," Marketel explained. "It seems Armand took part in a scene of some sort in which Strum tried to blackmail a woman."

"Did he mention the lady's name?" said Roger.

Naomi stood stock still, one hand half outstretched, her lips parted. She felt unable to breathe, half suffocated, rigid, and then, as suddenly, her whole frame relaxed. She realized that Armand must have kept his word. If Paul had known the answer to that particular question, he would not be sitting there with that deliberate impartially judicial air. Once more circumstance had spared her. She dropped into the nearest chair, she listened to Paul's answer as if, now, it hardly concerned her.

"No," came exactly the answer she had expected, "Armand felt it was not fair to bring up this woman's name again."

"Of course," murmured Victoria.

But Roger had yet one more question to ask.

"Did Armand seem embarrassed when you questioned him about his acquaintance with Strum?"

"Embarrassed!" Paul exclaimed. "Armand! Why should he be? It's merely that long arm of coincidence as far as we are concerned—besides," he added, dimly perceiving that there was a reservation in Roger's mind, "one does run up against anybody and everybody in a place like Nice."

There was a look of mingled relief and disappointment in Roger's face; he was glad that Armand seemed to be innocent, but on the other hand, once more it made the solution of the mystery as far off as ever.

"If I were to see Chi Lung myself," he ruminated, "I

wonder . . . should I be able to make out what he was driving at."

"He might be more explicit with you," Paul answered.

"But when am I to see him?" Roger asked.

"As the Oriental is a person of moods, the sooner the better," Paul suggested.

Roger glanced down at his watch. "If there were time I'd go now," he said.

"But," put in Naomi eagerly, "why not stay now and see him tomorrow?"

"Stay!" repeated Roger, "I can't let you go alone."

"Why not? I have Parker," answered Naomi with a wan little smile. "Besides, you forget, I have lived in France so much. I know all the formalities."

"But," muttered Roger, "French officials can be troublesome."

"It won't be the first time I have had to deal with them," said his wife. She pulled up. She asked herself why she was pushing Roger into staying. She reminded herself that she did not know how much Chi Lung really knew, and yet for some reason, was it a woman's intuition, she was sure that she wished Roger to remain behind.

Roger hesitated, he disliked the idea of letting Naomi go alone. But, on the other hand, the issues were tremendous. His remaining might mean the discovery of the culprit; his going an indefinite delay. There was another consideration, too, unconfessed, but potent. He shrank from the thought of an encounter with French officials. They might have heard the story of the Chinese memorandum, and with their established attitude of accepting each man as guilty until he was proved innocent, they might let him see that, in their opinion, he was no better than a criminal at large.

"Are you perfectly certain you could manage alone?" he said as he moved over and sat by his wife.

"Perfectly sure," Naomi answered. "Besides," she added, knowing Roger's confidence in the maid who had been with his mother for years before Naomi was married, "Parker will look after me." She turned to Victoria, and

for the first time a gleam of joyfulness touched her face. "Roger has a profound respect for Parker," she said. "Not even the custom house officials can stand up against her."

Victoria felt that she was meant to second the change of plans, and still with the idea that there might be something in the background concerning Mrs. Melsham, she lent her weight to the scale.

Roger only required a little persuading. He wished to stay, he felt so much depended on his staying.

"Then, if you really don't mind," he told Naomi, and before she could answer, he had started to map out a plan of campaign.

"As soon as we have seen off Naomi," he told Paul, "we'll drive straight back to Chi Lung's house. I'll appeal to him, and when I have heard what he was doing with Strum at Portarlington Square, we will go on to Carson."

He was so eager that he hardly saw the boat train leave the platform, before he turned to Paul.

"Now for it!" he exclaimed.

But man proposes—and a very different end ensues; when Paul and Roger stood together facing that chocolate fronted house, they were both struck by the darkened windows, they rang twice, and heard the bell vibrate as if through empty space, then, just as they were looking at each other in consternation, a footman out of livery opened the doors.

"His Excellency is not at home. He left an hour ago," the man said.

"How?" exclaimed Paul.

"By motor."

"Where was he going?" Roger asked.

The man-servant shook his head. He had not heard—all he knew was that the Marquis Chi Lung had taken his secretary with him.

"Then he means to be away some time," Roger exclaimed dejectedly.

Paul shrugged his shoulders. The bird had flown. They were baffled again. They could only turn away feeling very

crestfallen. "It's to elude me," Roger exclaimed. "Am I always just to get to the verge of discovery and be disappointed!"

They decided to consult Carson and drove at once to his flat. Luck was with them, the detective was in and saw them immediately.

Carson looked curiously at Roger whom he had not seen since the first interview immediately after the catastrophe and his keen eyes saw the changes in the young man; he saw that the strain was beginning to affect him otherwise than physically, it was leaving its mark on the man's very soul.

The detective was genuinely concerned. He was somewhat of an anomaly. He had never lost his love for the beautiful, either in its concrete or abstract form, and he pursued the wrongdoer in much the same spirit that an experimentalist inoculates rabbits with typhoid germs, to inflict a minor pain for a greater gain. Viewed from a professional standpoint Carson had been intensely annoyed that Roger's scruples prevented his descending at once on Zouche; viewed as the attitude of a well-bred man he appreciated it—but all along, viewed from his experience of such investigations, he expected this attitude to be modified.

His first glance at the two men assured him that his anticipations were correct. Sir Roger de la Haye had waited until he could wait no longer. He was prepared to accede to anything.

"Mr. Carson," began Roger, "Mr. Marketel and I have just come from the Chinese envoy's house. We did not succeed in seeing him because his Excellency had left, apparently at a moment's notice. This journey, which seems to me to have been undertaken on the spur of the moment, seems so extraordinary that we have been wondering whether it could be connected in some way with our affair. What do you think?"

"Before hearing Mr. Carson's opinion," Paul broke in, "I think we ought to give him a detailed account of the interview which I had with the Marquis yesterday."

And once again he described Chi Lung's attitude as it had struck him, and repeated his cryptic sayings.

The detective listened in silence. When Paul had finished, he looked up with a sharp question:

"You say he seemed to take a special interest in the success of Sir Roger's marriage?"

"Yes," assented Marketel, "and if it is ever possible for a European to tell by look or word what an Oriental really feels, I should say he was moved in some way when I mentioned that Lady de la Haye was in trouble because of Mrs. Melsham's death."

"Mrs. Melsham is dead?"

Roger nodded. "Yes; she died suddenly at Aix, where she has been living since my wife's marriage."

"But I understood that his Excellency somewhat resented your marriage, Sir Roger?"

"In a way he did," Roger admitted, "but I think it was merely because a Celestial can never understand our attitude about marriage. The old man thought I ought to have consulted him before making my choice. He once said to Marketel: 'In the choice of his bride old Chi Lung was forgotten. My counsel is a weariness to him.' Also my wife declares that he dislikes her intensely, but probably she exaggerates somewhat."

The detective nodded and said no more. He had his own ideas about his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung.

"There's another thing I think you ought to know, Mr. Carson," Roger said presently, and his face hardened. "I accidentally found out that Mr. Hirst, who was one of our house party at Zouche during that week-end, came into the possession of £2,000 very shortly after. The explanation he gave to account for having unexpectedly found the means of joining the Arctic expedition which until then had been beyond his reach, I happen to know is false and impossible."

"What did Mr. Hirst say?" asked Carson.

"He said that Edward Buzby, the absconding trustee, had sent the money to him, presumably as conscience money; now, it happens to be a fact that when the money reached

Billy Hirst, Buzby had been dead five days. Mr. Marketel, whose wife was one of the scoundrel's victims, can confirm what I say."

Paul sprang up. Up till now, even he, for once, was so taken about that he could not utter a single word.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed; "what are you driving at, Roger?"

"I want to know where Billy got that money," Roger persisted determinedly.

"I can tell you," answered Paul, and he laughed awkwardly, "since you must know. I sent Billy that money."

"You? Why on earth?"

"Well, you see," the big man spoke shamefacedly, "Billy had practically not a shilling in the world and was on the point of going out with an expedition under some Brazilian half-breed. I knew what that meant, I too knew his heart was really set on the Arctic expedition, and that it was merely a question of £2,000."

The detective could not help smiling, the man of money spoke of £2,000 as if it were a mere bagatelle. "So," went on Paul simply, "I sent him the money anonymously by special messenger, and the boy, loath to think evil of anyone, jumped to the conclusion that Buzby had repented and was trying to make reparation."

Roger sat back in his chair with something very nearly resembling a movement of vexation. The next moment the man's innate generosity asserted itself.

"Naomi was right," he exclaimed, "she said she knew Billy was innocent."

Carson looked up sharply, but said nothing for a few minutes, then he turned to De la Haye.

"Lady de la Haye said that," he said.

"She was positive," answered Roger warmly.

"Why? I wonder," insinuated the detective softly.

"A woman's intuition, of course," Roger returned.

"The unknown quantity," supplemented the detective. He sat still for the next five minutes, thinking hard.

"Sir Roger," he began, when he raised his head, "I have

a suggestion to put before you. I am still convinced that the culprit was someone from within. Why not draw up a sort of chart bearing the names of all those who were in the house at the time and ask them to put on it in detail what they did during those particular hours? I feel sure that your friends would not mind in the slightest if the plan were explained to them. Even if it does not actually lead to discovery, it will narrow down the field of inquiry considerably and make it easier for us to find the culprit eventually. I suggest that we should prepare the chart without delay. When it is ready, ask all those who were at Zouche during that week-end to come there again, and tell them of your plan. I will undertake to help them all to remember how they spent their time."

And Roger with a picture of the meeting with Helmside in the Piazza del Erbè at Verona Square, of the pile of refusals that had met him on his return to Zouche, and of his life there since his return—consented.

As soon as the train was well out of Charing Cross Station the smile which Naomi had conjured up for Roger's benefit faded from her face. She rarely found herself alone without going back over the same entangled mass of considerations, so now her first thought was for Roger, for his unhappiness. If she could have paid the price herself, she would have discharged the debt in full, not only gladly, but humbly and thankfully. It was that ever-enlarging ring of consequences which dismayed her. A woman's past invariably strays into her future. That she accepted; what she did not accept, was that an innocent victim should suffer for the guilty.

She had come to the point when she would have not only confessed, but when she would have found a real relief in confession. But she knew now that such a course would merely shift the incidence of the disgrace. A man whose wife was little short of a common thief, could only retire, Roger's career would be doubly ruined and in addition he would have lost his faith in his wife. He would feel that

the Naomi he loved had never existed. Confession was out of the question. She must go on temporizing, deviating, fighting until she sank worsted or discovery intervened.

The short crossing was rough and stormy, and physical discomfort prevented Naomi thinking of anything else, but when she was once again in the train, hastening across France at sixty miles an hour, her thoughts went back to the same topic.

Chi Lung hated her—of that she was sure. Chi Lung knew Hermann Strum—Paul was as determined as Roger to find the thief.

They had a detective at work. She especially dreaded Carson.

Last but not least, Armand de Rochecorbon was possessed of the key to the mystery. Whether he knew it or not, he had but to mention the Villa Paul et Virginie, to say what had passed there—and the whole matter became as clear as daylight.

Naomi sat looking out into the night. Parker was nodding beside her, but she could not rest. She watched the moonlight flooding the landscape, and the silver glow recalled the first night she met Roger. She had vowed then to keep her friendship with him free from her mother's evil influence, and unwittingly she had exploited him, as she had exploited no one else, in her mother's interests. Now, that mother was dead, "And," said Roger's wife to herself, "I am not sorry as I ought to be. I cannot grieve as a daughter should for a mother."

Naomi was delayed most of a day in Paris attending to formalities at Mrs. Melsham's bank, so she reached Aix when the pink and gold of the dawn had hardly faded out of the sky. She drove through the streets she knew so well, and asked for rooms at a quiet little hotel beyond the *établissement des bains* called Le Pavillon des Ruines. She recollected that the proprietor was a benevolent soul, and that in the old days madame, his wife, had looked on her with a kindly eye. At first it seemed almost impossible to the worthy couple that the English girl they recollected

always short of money, always driven to expedients, could be this beautifully dressed "Milady" with a maid and a dressing-bag with gold fittings, but once Naomi explained her errand, madame sympathetically recollected that Mademoiselle had always been "L'Ange de la Maison" and papa, whose business it was to do his better half's bidding, was commanded to exert himself to his utmost with Monsieur le Préfet. All that monsieur's utmost spared her, Naomi knew well enough. French officialdom can be exasperating past endurance, bewildering enough to drive one off one's head, but though there were some very disagreeable moments, things went as easily for her as might be, and in less than a week Naomi was ready to return to England.

The *"rapide"* left about five in the evening, and after *déjeuner,* while Parker packed zealously, Naomi strolled out into the little strip of garden known as the Parc. Immediately before her were the fragments of the two Corinthian columns, dating from the Roman occupation, which gave its name to the little hotel, further along were the wooded heights towering above the town, and to the left was the little lake of Bourget with its water as placid and as blue as if no storm ever disturbed them. But Naomi's eyes fixed themselves on the glimmer of marble and white stone which showed amid the ilex trees and pines halfway up the hill. It was the little cemetery attached to the English church. Mrs. Melsham was buried there. Naomi had ordered flowers to be laid on the grave, they were there now, still fresh and fragrant. She would send other flowers, later she would put up a simple memorial, but would she ever come back to visit the spot? All her being yearned to sorrow even as other children sorrowed for other parents.

She left the Parc and began to climb the hill, hardly realizing whither she was going. She wandered into the cemetery. The position she had chosen for the grave was on the crest of a little hillock, away from the other tombstones. The sun shone on the freshly turned earth, the wind from the lake cooled the hot sunlight. Naomi sank

down on her knees. Even now she wished her heart would go out in love, in mourning.

"I wonder," she said, "if the dead know what happens to those they leave behind them?"

She hoped not in this case. If death had enlarged Mrs. Melsham's vision, then surely she must recognize all the sorrow she had bequeathed to her only child. Naomi rose. She was tired, she was hopeless, but the mere wish that her mother might be kept from remorse had brought a certain quietness.

"Perhaps," she said softly, "mama never had a chance."

She turned to leave the grave, and as she did so a gasp, a moan of fear escaped her lips. She saw—she really did see? it was not a trick of her imagination?—she saw his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung coming towards her.

She watched the shuffling gait, she heard the padding of the soft boots, she watched the old man come nearer and nearer. His pace was so deliberate that it seemed to her that he never would get round the bend and on to the little level strip freshly cut out of the hillside for the grave; but, when he was only a few inches from her, his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung stopped, he cast down his slanting eyes, he tucked a hand into either sleeve.

"Your Excellency here?" Naomi stammered.

"Even so," the old man answered smoothly, but he darted a glance at her, and the malignity in his eyes terrified her.

"I—I—I——" she began. Her voice failed her, her mind refused to go on with the sequence of the sentence.

"So," observed Chi Lung, "silence is golden. Yet the voice of the peach blossom is as soft as the murmur of running water. Why are these old ears denied its music? Has the white lily no greeting for him held in esteem by her strong partner?"

"Your Excellency," Naomi forced herself to ask, "you followed me here?"

"Even so."

"Why?"

"Is it not well to watch with filial grief?"

"You would see for yourself that my mother is dead?"

"The fresh earth, the mourning robe, are they not witnesses?" the Chinaman answered. Naomi locked her hands together. So, for some purpose of his own, this old man had traveled all the way from London to Aix to satisfy himself that the report of Mrs. Melsham's death was true.

Naomi had not to ask herself twice what that purpose might be. It could only be connected with the Chinese memorandum, and therefore his Excellency must know or must suspect that her mother was in some way concerned in the theft.

"Your—your Excellency," she stammered, "why—why have you come? Tell me, what brought you here?"

The wrinkled old face, as malignant as an idol in an old Thibetan temple, looked pitilessly at the starting blue eyes, at the twitching lips, and then all at once Naomi's control failed her.

"Tell me," she clamored, "why have you come here? For God's sake, your Excellency, don't play with me any longer. Why do you hate me? Why do you like to torture me?"

"Peace!" began the old man in his easiest tone, and then his Excellency suddenly seemed to change his mind. "Let plain words speak, then," he decided. "Let dust know it is no better than dirt. To Roger the peach blossom is a priceless flower, to Chi Lung it is no better than a shriveled husk, for he knows the secret that the woman thinks she is hiding."

"What secret?" gasped Naomi.

"Is there more than one?" demanded his Excellency, and he put out his hand and clutched her sleeve. "The reptile Hermann Strum sold the memorandum to the sheets of intelligence, but was there not another who carried the writing to the hands of Hermann Strum?"

Naomi looked wildly at the old Celestial. All her com-

posure had failed her, she was panic-stricken. She could neither think nor speak, she broke away, she edged down to the low wall which fenced the graveyard from the drop of the hill below, she clung to it as if she must find shelter under its shadow, support from the mere uprising of its four feet of solid masonry.

The old man followed her. As she cowered away, he came on until she got to the bend where the wall joined the unreclaimed hillside, and she could get no further. There Roger's wife turned about. She put her hands on the boulders behind her, leaned forward, every nerve quivering with fear, her whole frame trembling.

"What are you going to do?" she asked. "What are you going to tell Roger?"

The old man looked at her. He knew something about the amount of pain, mental or physical, that a human frame could stand, and he saw that Naomi was near to the breaking-point.

It was not pity, it was expediency, the fear that if he delayed too long he might be balked of the full measure of revenge which made him speak.

"The pear falls to the ground when the fruit is ripe," he told her.

"What are you going to do?" she besought. "What are you going to do?" she repeated. "Oh, I know," she went on, her voice rising to a shrill note—"you are going to tell Roger," and then, incoherently, she returned to her first question. "What are you going to do?" she bewailed.

"Nothing," answered his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung, "I am going to do nothing."

He had calculated on the effect of an unexpected respite. "A man can die twice over while his head is yet on his shoulders," he muttered to himself, and then what his Excellency had foreseen came to pass. Naomi lurched back and forth, her hands slipped nervelessly from their support, she rolled down sideways, and lying prone in a huddled mass of black drapery and golden hair, her cheek rested on the fresh earth of her mother's grave.

Nature had been merciful if humanity was not. It had at least given her a temporary respite.

Chi Lung looked at the unconscious figure, he shrugged his lean shoulders. " The culprit cries out when he sees the bamboo," the old man told himself and he turned away without so much as a backward glance.

CHAPTER XXII

THE afternoon of the next day following his interview with Naomi, his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung sat in that inner room at Portarlington Place, of which Paul Marketel had caught but one glimpse.

Perhaps the fatigue of the two long journeys in quick succession had told on the old man, for, as he squatted on the low cushions, his face was not only impassive, it was emptied of every expression, save that of a weariness which had yet an element of alertness about it.

The old Chinaman was awaiting developments, much in the same way as the experienced tabby waits for the unwary mouse. His Excellency might be conscious of his physical exhaustion: he was equally conscious of his strong position.

"It is he with much gold in his bag whom beggars importune," he told himself.

So far, if he had expected a message from Naomi, none had arrived. On the other hand, on his return Chi Lung found a letter from Roger beseeching him to come to Zouche on the following day. Then Roger went on to say that he and Marketel were following out the suggestion of a chart. They were preparing a time-table by which they would know what each guest was doing during each hour of the day of the theft, and the letter finished with a moving appeal to his Excellency to help them with his presence. For the sake of his dead father, for the sake of old friendship, Sir Arthur de la Haye's son begged the special envoy from China to come to Zouche.

The old man had the letter by him. He had read it at least a dozen times, he took it up once more. Roger had arrived at the point of imploring his help, Roger had come to see for himself that, not even in the most intimate circumstances of his private life, could he pass over his old friend from the East.

" He who rejects the stout oak, and would lean on a split bamboo, must expect a wound in the palm," the old man muttered.

Then, just as a hunter examines each strand of the net, when a fine quarry is in question, Chi Lung carefully marshaled, once again, the facts of the case. He went back to that hour at Zouche, when the first suspicion of Naomi had entered his mind, he reviewed the careful steps by which he had come to find that his ancient enemy Strum was implicated in this theft also, and then, for during the weeks of seeming inertia the old man had spared neither time, money nor labor, he had run Strum to earth, had extricated from him what he had to reveal, and had provided that Paul Marketel should learn exactly so much that he wanted above all things to know more.

" The best wine takes the longest to mellow," the old man chuckled; and then his face darkened.

Paul Marketel had mentioned Mrs. Melsham's death, and his Excellency still felt that she deserved a special punishment for departing this life several days—no more than that —too soon to be convenient for his plans.

Perhaps, before even Paul had taken his leave, the old man had determined to go to France. " The door of Death opens but rarely when the undertaker is at leisure," his Excellency summed up.

So he and his secretary took the boat over to Paris *via* Dieppe, while Naomi went *via* Boulogne. The Chinaman chose the less-frequented route, as he wished no one to know of his departure. In Aix he found few difficulties. Mrs. Melsham's body was lying at the local morgue, there had been an inquiry as to her death, and, as the Oriental diplomat knew exactly how to go about such things, it was easy for him to obtain a glimpse of the dead woman's *dossier,* besides, the hotelkeeper, still smarting under the wrong Mrs. Melsham had done him by dying in such a conspicuous fashion, and judiciously encouraged by Fu Yang, who posed as a Celestial enamored of French commercial methods, told more than he perhaps meant of the

shifts and evasions by which his client paid for her rooms. Chi Lung had convinced himself that Mrs. Melsham was implicated in the theft.

It only remained for him to find out who had actually taken the photographs. He determined to see Naomi before she left Aix. He had a careful watch set on her movements. He heard that she grew paler and more listless, and he was informed of her setting out for the cemetery as soon as she began to mount the hill. Instantly the old man, with that calculated cruelty of the Oriental, determined to follow her. The time, the place, the reminiscences the situation were sure to evoke, would all tell against her, and in addition there would be the shock of seeing him. Judiciously intimidated, Roger's wife would be sure to blurt out all she knew. Chi Lung's calculations proved as correct as they were apt to be when he was dealing with human weakness. He learned that Naomi's participation in the theft had been active and positive. Then he left her without as much as a twinge of pity. What did it matter if she lived or died?

As a matter of fact he knew that she had survived, for unknown to them he had actually traveled as far as Paris in the same train as Naomi and her maid. When Naomi opened her eyes on that sun-flecked hillside, it was to find Parker anxiously bending over her.

Parker had been in the service of Roger's mother before Naomi's marriage. She had accompanied the girl on her honeymoon at Amabelle's suggestion, she looked after Naomi's well-being, and incidentally after Roger's too—with precisely that devotion which no wage can buy; so now, all the trunks corded, and the hotel bills settled, she set out to find her mistress. She tracked her out of the Parc, heard from the *concierge* at the gate that he had seen "his ladi" walking up the hill, and concluded, at once, that the cemetery had been the girl's destination.

Once there, Parker made straight to Mrs. Melsham's grave; Naomi was just returning to consciousness as she hurried up. The beautiful Lady de la Haye was squatting on the ground, she was cowering as if she expected a blow.

"You," she babbled unsteadily, when she saw her maid, "you—who—who else—have you seen——"

Her words trailed away again. Parker concluded that her mistress was half-dazed, and just as she supposed to quiet a groundless fear she assured Naomi that there was no one about but herself, that she had not seen another soul in the cemetery but a beggar as she came up the hill.

"Most folks would have more sense than to walk up hills with the sun as hot as it is this time of day," Parker concluded severely.

Naomi began to cry weakly. She implored Parker not to leave her, to help her up, to take her away from the cemetery, away from Aix, and Parker, sure that at all times home, especially an English home, was the best place, was only too willing to do her utmost.

She put her arm round Naomi's waist and guided her along. With each step Naomi's courage, her determination asserted themselves. She must, she would be well enough to leave Aix by the evening train.

Her determination justified itself. She and Parker journeyed straight through to London, but Roger, when he met the travelers at Victoria, was shocked by his wife's appearance.

"I ought not to have let you go alone!" he said to her; as soon as they were in the motor, "still——" and he looked out of the window. Naomi noticed the break in the sentence, she saw his preoccupied air, she was back again amid the dismal round of reservation, suspicion, brooding.

Then Roger all at once sat back with a jerk.

"My poor darling," he exclaimed penitently, "to think of my letting you go all alone! What a selfish brute I am becoming, but you did know, dear——"

She stopped him. The revolving wheel was coming back to the same point. She smiled at him, closed her eyes, and pretended to be asleep. Leaving him to his thoughts, thinking her thoughts, was better than saying certain things aloud. But the car was hardly clear of the London suburbs and speeding down that long stretch of level road, which runs

eastward right through Essex, before Roger touched his wife's arm.

"Dear," he asked, "are you too tired to listen to me?"

"No," she answered. She sat up, alert, disturbed. She had heard the excitement in Roger's voice. She looked sideways and saw the uneasy expression in his eyes. "What is it?" she asked fearfully.

"This," began Roger, and quickly, tersely, giving her no time to dissent, for he knew how little his wife would welcome an investigation at Zouche itself, he told her of the latest plan, and described the chart and its purpose. A new fear clutched at Naomi's heart. Even if Chi Lung kept to his announced intention of saying nothing, and if he spared her, she was well aware it would not be to ease her, it seemed as if the truth must come out. She would never be strong enough, adroit enough to evade Carson's cross-examination.

"Shall I have to fill up a column too?" she gasped.

"Of course. It must be everyone or no one. It wouldn't be fair otherwise."

"I shall never be able to remember exactly what I did," began Naomi.

She leaned away from her husband, right into the corner of the car.

"That is another lie! I am always lying," she told herself, for every minute of that day was mapped out on her brain as if it had been drawn there by a pencil pointed with fire, and she knew that there was quite a quarter of an hour to account for between her mother's leaving the salon with Lady de la Haye and her own rejoining them on the terrace.

Roger put out his arm and drew her back towards him.

"Oh, yes! you will remember, dear, if you try, and you must try; it means so much to me now. Begin now. Think as we go along. You have a good memory, make it work now," he persisted.

"Yes," she said feebly. She knitted her brow, and Roger was silent. Probably he thought she was going back to the

day of the theft; in reality, she was so filled with pain, with apprehension, that it was all she could do to sit still.

Yet when the car turned into the gates at Zouche, she asked herself if she did not wish they had twenty miles more to go. But once within the house, Naomi found that Lady de la Haye, Victoria, and Aimée were there before her, and as soon as she saw them, she realized that they would stand between her and immediate peril. They were all touched by her appearance, sure that she was over-tired, they vied with each other in offering her little attentions. Naomi looked from one to the other tremulously.

What would they think of her, say of her on the morrow? Would one of them take her hand, address her, even look her way?

Littleport had placed the tea table in the Queen Anne room, and there Naomi joined the women of the party as soon as she had taken off her hat.

"Make tea, Aimée," she said, remembering the girl's pleased air behind the tea table at Filisburg, and then she asked where Paul might be.

"I think he is with Roger in the Chinese Room, conferring with him about tomorrow," Victoria answered.

Naomi put down her teacup abruptly, for her hand trembled until the spoon rattled in the saucer.

"Who is really coming tomorrow?" she asked.

"Has not Roger told you?" Amabelle replied.

"Everyone," put in Aimée impulsively.

"Everyone!" echoed Naomi. Was the ordeal to be even more severe than she had reckoned on? "No!" she objected with an odd, jerky laugh. "Surely not everyone. Neither Billy nor Armand can be here."

"But they will be," pursued Aimée. "Armand is here already," and she gave a highly colored description of the little Frenchman's arrival in his car, which he had christened "La Belle Audace," and of his voluble prophecies as to its capacity for breaking the world's speed record.

"But," quavered Naomi, "I thought he had started."

"For Pekin," interjected Aimée again. "He put it off

to help Roger——" and she added, for the child had a capacity for taking hold of a dramatic situation and hastening the crisis. "He has gone to pick up Billy and taken Paul with him. Victoria is wrong. Paul isn't with Roger. I saw him go off with Armand."

"You see everything, Miss Mischief," began Victoria, but Naomi brushed aside any attempted lightness.

"Is Billy in England, too?" she cried out hopelessly.

The exclamation elicited further details. Billy's relief ship had never got farther than New Zealand, for the expedition was met there by the news that the original ship, of which they were going in search, had got clear of the ice.

"There was nothing for it but to turn round and go home again," the girl said, and she went on: "Then Paul saw the announcement in the newspapers that Billy was due in London just at this time, and wired him to come on immediately to Zouche. Billy in his turn had lost no time, he had set off on a motorcycle, but the cycle was not equal to Billy, or Billy to the cycle—anyway there had been a breakdown, and Billy had telephoned from Sherisham, a little village sixteen miles away, saying he was stranded."

Naomi took up her cup and drank off the remainder of her tea. She was dimly conscious that Victoria had taken up the story, that she was saying that Paul had gone with Armand, and that somehow the chart came even into this.

She rose and steadied herself against a chair. Her first idea was to get to Roger, to see him before Billy came. She had no idea that the origin of the two thousand pounds had been cleared up. She feared Billy's indignant denial, that his repudiation would somehow bring the truth nearer home.

"I think," she said dully, "that I had better go and see what Roger is doing."

She made to the door, opened it and shut it. She knew within Aimée was speaking again, she was sure that the girl was saying sympathetic things about herself. The kindness only seemed to add to her pain. She went dejectedly along to the Chinese Room. Roger was there—alone—he was

poring over the chart. He hardly looked up when she entered.

Naomi came straight up to him.

"Roger," she began, "do you know Billy is coming?"

He understood all that she did not say.

"Dear," he said, "I was mistaken. Paul sent that money to Billy."

"Paul!" echoed Naomi.

She sat down and looked at her husband with such wild eyes that he hastened to explain.

"It requires a hard-headed man to be really sentimental," he began with one of his rare touches of geniality. "Paul was in trouble with his conscience. He'd won, and Billy had lost—Victoria."

"What wonderful things some men will do for love!" Naomi exclaimed.

"What wonderful things most men might do if all wives were like you!" Roger returned.

She almost shrank from him, and yet it was so rarely now that she had the first place in his mind. She wanted to stay there if only for a minute—for half a minute. She tried to smile.

But Roger put out his disengaged hand. He drew the chart forward.

"Now," he said, "if you can only remember one thing at a time, let us put that down. You came downstairs?"

He looked up, waiting for her to reply. She broke from him. "No! no! no!" she protested. "Not now. I'm tired"—and then Roger lost his temper and his patience.

"Tired! You are not trying to remember," he exclaimed. "I don't believe you want to try."

"Roger!" Naomi gasped, and at that very moment Littleport came in to say that Mr. Hirst had arrived and had gone straight to the Queen Anne room.

The next day Chi Lung was due to arrive at Zouche. Roger was so impatient that he went off too soon, driving his own car, to meet the old Chinaman.

Naomi watched him go, and then she looked round to find Victoria beside her.

"He has gone at least half an hour too soon," Naomi began with a hopeless gesture.

"We are all restless," Victoria admitted—"I don't believe one of us slept soundly last night."

Naomi turned from the hall door. She went along the passage and looked out on to the terrace. She said she must go out, but first she must have a hat, she would go upstairs to get it herself, and then once downstairs she threw it aside, said the wind was too cold, and suggested that Victoria come with her into the salon.

"I believe there are shelves of beautiful things inside the cabinets," she began feverishly. "Let us go and explore. You know," and she laughed drearily, "I have never had time to look round in my own home."

Victoria encouraged the idea. It would give Naomi something to do. It might even occupy her mind, for it was evident that suspense or excitement were working on her until she could hardly control herself.

"If Roger isn't cleared soon the poor thing will collapse," Paul's wife told herself, as she pushed open the doors into the salon.

"Try the big cabinet first," she advised, for as it happened she knew a good deal about the treasures there.

Naomi nodded. She went swiftly towards the tall cabinet, with its black doors heavily inlaid with golden designs, she turned the key and looked within. There were several covers on the first shelf and she pulled out the first one and opened it. It contained a set of really fine old paintings on rice paper. For a little the beauty, the quaintness, the wealth of color, really arrested Naomi, and then she paused, with one of the thin sheets fluttering in her hand.

"Do you hear—anything?" she asked.

Instead of answering, Victoria went to the one window from where she could see a glimpse of the drive. She

waited a moment, two. She had caught the whirr of a motor as well. It came nearer.

"Yes!" she exclaimed, as Roger's car passed across the gap she was watching—"it is Roger."

"Has he anyone with him?" Naomi broke in.

"Chi Lung," Victoria answered.

Naomi bundled the rice paintings back into their cover, she hurried to Victoria, and hastily she opened the window.

"Come with me," she gasped—"come," and then seeing Victoria's look of amazement she faltered, "I feel all unstrung—I must have time—to get myself in hand. . . . Come into the garden."

She seized Victoria's arm, pushed her on to the terrace, and followed herself.

"Listen!" she whispered, and she began to shake. "We were only just out of the room in time," and both she and Victoria heard the Chinaman's voice uplifted in a kind of invocation.

"Hope of the house, I come at your bidding," the old man was saying.

Naomi clutched on to Victoria again, she pulled Paul's wife after her, and Victoria, startled, almost fearful that Naomi was about to break down, her panic seemed so unreasoning, let herself be hurried into the bowling-green.

The two women had hardly left the terrace, their swift footfalls were still audible, when Chi Lung entered the salon.

"Naomi," began Roger, as he and his mother followed quickly, "his Excellency has come."

He stopped short. There were the chairs pushed aside, the half-open cabinet. All the signs of recent occupation.

"Where is she?" he exclaimed.

"She was here with Victoria," answered Lady de la Haye, but as Roger went quickly towards the window with a vexed exclamation, Chi Lung stopped him.

"Women and sparrows always twitter in company," the old man announced.

"But she can't have gone far," Roger persisted; "I will

go and look for her," and with a muttered word of excuse he stepped on to the terrace.

Lady de la Haye had put out a warning hand, but Roger did not so much as see it, and now she looked uneasily at Chi Lung.

"He is so anxious, your Excellency," Amabelle murmured.

"Nay!" retorted the old man; "Chi Lung is old. Youth pursues the butterfly. But," and he looked up, with a twinkling of malice in his tired eyes, "old age knows that it began as a worm and will end in a hole in the wall."

"Your Excellency," protested Amabelle again, "he has suffered so much."

"And," remarked the old man, "whether the judgment is just or unjust, the stick is equally as heavy and the flesh no less tender."

He sank down on to a sofa and permitted himself to take snuff in the Eastern fashion, a circumstance which showed that the special envoy from China was genuinely perturbed, for unless he wished to be purposely disconcerting the old man rarely offended against European conventions.

Lady de la Haye knew this, and concluded therefore that Roger's sufferings had made a deep impression on her old friend. It was a moment she had hoped for, and yet, knowing Celestial calm, had perhaps hardly expected.

"Your Excellency," she said, as she seated herself before him, "I am going to plead for Roger—for the son of your old friend—is he not almost as dear to you as if he belonged to your house?"

She waited a moment, and Chi Lung's very silence gave her courage.

"Your Excellency," she repeated, "if you can help us, do not delay, do not procrastinate. We put all our hopes in you, all our trust. I beg you, I implore you."

The old man rose with an abrupt movement.

"Peace!" he returned; but his voice was no longer hard, it was mellow. "Peace," he went on. "These old ears may not listen to such words. Does the judge say to the

debtor, And if it please you, pay what you owe? Reflect, O wise among unwise, even as the old Buddha is exalted above her sex—on whose head is the obligation to repay?" and then answering his own question, the old man added, "Chi Lung has a debt to pay, and you ask him for a gift."

"A gift!" echoed Amabelle, her face flushed. "Then you can help us—you will," she exclaimed.

She turned as she spoke, the indication of a frown on her forehead. Roger was entering the room, he had Naomi with him, and advisable as Amabelle knew it to be that Roger's wife should welcome the old Celestial, she wished their arrival had been delayed a few minutes. The white-haired woman felt that she had been on the point of hearing something. Chi Lung had been receptive, benign, and now, as Naomi came forward, pale, cold and distant, with an air which might be construed to betoken resentment, but which was really the paralysis of fear, Amabelle saw the mask drawn once again over the wrinkled yellow face.

"Your Excellency," Roger began, "my wife is as delighted to welcome you as I am. It was concern for me that drove her into the garden, but she returns as soon as she learns that your Excellency's foot has stepped over our threshold."

"So," murmured the old man, and though he was generally chary about shaking hands with a woman, he put out his hand now. Naomi could but put her white fingers into the yellow claw-like ones. She made an attempt to speak, but not a sound would pass her blue lips.

"The warmth of her welcome does too much honor to this worthless one," the old man announced. He laid his other hand over hers. "It is strange," he said. "This that I hold is as a ball of ice from the Great Mountains."

He looked up and caught Naomi's glanced fixed on him. "The hand of the weak partner of Roger makes snow in my palm," his Excellency went on. "It reminds me of a courteous punishment of my country. When a mandarin is invited to confess and his tongue is obstinately still in

his head, then we take his hand, and lay it in a wedge of ice, and then we close the hand tighter and tighter, until the high-placed one grows tired of life and prays for a death which will not hurry."

Naomi gave a little gasp, she swayed. She looked so fearfully behind her that Lady de la Haye stepped forward and put her arm round the girl. She could not understand how it came or why, but she saw that there was a new animosity, a fresh antagonism.

"Naomi dear, what is it?" she whispered urgently.

"Nothing, nothing!" Roger's wife murmured.

She freed herself, stood upright. She rallied all her courage, and forced herself to turn on the old man.

"Your Excellency has come to help Roger," she asked—she looked swiftly at him. "What news do you bring Roger?" she challenged.

"The well of Fate is so deep that this poor worm has drawn no words from the waters of truthfulness—as yet," his Excellency replied.

"But," cried out Roger, "his Excellency hopes for enlightenment. He is as confident as I am——"

The old man cut him short.

"My son," he said, "there is always one way to the open door, but sometimes it is guarded by a fierce dragon, and," he went on aggressively, "he who invokes the demons sometimes sees the Devil for his pains."

"But," put in Amabelle, who felt that the old man was escaping them again, "there is always good to put evil to flight. The trouble is our poor eyes take dross for gold. We know the gold now, and we rely on your Excellency."

A moment's silence followed this direct appeal. The old Chinaman made no attempt at deprecation. He looked from Roger to Naomi and back at Amabelle, and then he drew up to his old friend's widow.

"The flowering of the peach blossom has passed its prime," he remarked, utterly indifferent as to whether Naomi heard or not.

"You notice that Naomi is looking tired," Lady de la

Haye said; she glanced at the girl, at Roger. Her diplomatic tact had always been remarkable, and so now her one wish was to get them out of the room. She was sure that she could best serve Roger in his absence.

"Take Naomi to rest," she said significantly.

Roger understood, Naomi was only too thankful for a few moments' respite. The door closed on them and then Amabelle turned back to the old Chinaman.

"So you notice how ill Naomi is looking," she began. "Poor child," she went on, "the strain is almost more than she can bear. I believe she suffers even more than Roger; I was shocked when I saw her yesterday."

The old man muttered something into his thin beard.

"You must agree with me that she looks sadly worn," Amabelle urged.

"N'importe," retorted his Excellency roughly.

He moved a step away, as if he would at least put a space —if but a small one—between himself and something particularly foolish.

"Let Roger buy himself another wife," he suggested. "The first time a man would pluck a flower for his hearth, he says, 'Mother, is she well-favored?' but when he would bring in a pumpkin to live by the lotus flower, he says, 'Mother, is the rice soft in her pot when it comes to the feast?'"

Amabelle heard the hostility in the slow voice. If it had been an ordinary matter, she would have broken off the discussion and let the old man have his prejudice, precisely because it was an unreasonable one, but Chi Lung's attitude towards Naomi was of such vital importance that Amabelle determined to make another appeal to him.

She came up to him. She seated herself by him.

"Your Excellency," she said, "you honor virtue, I know. There is the virtue of her who stays by the hearth, as well as of him who learns the classics."

She stopped. Chi Lung was looking at her sideways and his expression was not benevolent. She felt it would be difficult to win admiration where tolerance came so reluc-

tantly, but Amabelle de la Haye was not only a brave woman, she was a fair-minded one.

"Naomi," she went on, "is as a rose in my garden. She is as sweet perfume to my senses."

"Why," thrust in Chi Lung, "does the mother-in-law speak honey of her son's wife?"

"Because I know Naomi," Lady de la Haye answered, direct enough this time. She put a hand on the old man's sleeve. "One woman knows another," she said, "that is why the wise always judge a woman by the women of whom she makes friends, not by the men. I know Naomi!"

"Yet," interrupted Chi Lung, "when the shadow was cast before the happening——"

"I know," Amabelle admitted, "I was doubtful, very doubtful, but I have seen what she has been to Roger—what she has done for him. Your Excellency," she continued, a note of entreaty in her voice, "Naomi has done for Roger what neither you nor I could do. We love him better than ourselves—we would give him all we have."

"All we have," the old man repeated.

"But neither of us could have helped him as Naomi has—she alone could comfort him—could warm him. Youth goes to youth, your Excellency. We stand on the outer circle, we look on and suffer—only Naomi can enter into the very inmost chamber of Roger's life."

The old man was silent. His head was bent.

Amabelle waited. Without, the shrill cry of a homing bird was the one note which broke the stillness.

Chi Lung's old back relaxed yet more. His chin almost touched his chest.

Amabelle knew that this very speechlessness made for hope. If the Marquis Chi Lung had meant to reject her appeal, he would have done so at once.

She rose, stood before him, and held out her hands.

"Your Excellency," she said, "is it not written in your own book that only he is wise who knows the truth when he hears it, and hearing it, gives heed?"

Chi Lung rose to his feet quickly.

"*Bueno!*" he exclaimed, "more than once has the Lord of Wisdom deigned to speak by the mouth of a woman."

Amabelle caught her breath, she had won. She had accomplished this great thing for Roger. She had made his Excellency see that Naomi was essential to her son's happiness.

It took her a moment to recover her self-possession, and when she looked again at her old friend she was struck by his attitude.

The Marquis Chi Lung was still standing in the same place, but for once the yellowed old face had lost all its impassivity. The old Chinaman looked frankly perplexed.

"What is it?" demanded Amabelle.

Chi Lung did not move. He probably did not even hear the question. A new thought had just struck him. He remembered that kindness is never fully acceptable save when it comes in the precise form the recipient would choose it. What profit would there be to Roger in clearing him but to plunge him into deeper grief?

Amabelle watched him intently.

The old man seemed to pause again, to consider. There was silence in the room, until the throbbing of another motor engine came in to them.

"It must be Armand bringing Billy," Amabelle murmured.

She meant that now the assembly was complete, that now there only remained the actual comparison of the chart, the facts it might elicit, above all the information his Excellency must have to give.

To Chi Lung it meant such a very different thing.

He came up to her, looked fixedly at her.

"Behold!" he said, "we say we will turn the river to the north, and lo! One wiser than we says it must flow to the south."

CHAPTER XXIII

HALF an hour later Roger sent Littleport to tell each guest individually that his or her presence was requested in the Chinese writing-room.

Roger and Naomi were there already. There was suppressed excitement in the whole of Roger's bearing. Feverishly he moved about the room, he said the sun came in and pulled down the blind, only to run it up again impatiently the next moment. He went to the desk, he pushed aside the sheet of scribbling paper he himself had laid on the top of the chart, with a testy word, and then he bent over the chart and studied it anew.

Naomi watched him in silence. She shivered and her fingers worked nervously. Should she tell Roger herself, now—quickly—before the others came, before the old Chinaman denounced her? Suppose when it came to it Roger cared more for his vindication than for her. She must make quite sure. She went up to him quickly, put her hand on his shoulder. "Roger!" she murmured. He did not look up, though he answered, "Yes, dear?"

"Roger, do you still . . . love . . . me?"

Something in her tone roused him. He turned quickly and looked at her.

"Naomi!! Of course I do." He took her hands and drew her to him. "Dear, why do you ask?"

"Because I . . . I feel that today is going to be one of the test days of our lives," she faltered.

"Naomi, I feel that too," he exclaimed. "Perhaps . . . it is the lifting of this shadow—my vindication! I shall never know a moment's happiness until I am cleared."

"Then!" faltered Naomi, "I—I—don't make up in any way. I don't count."

"You do count," Roger protested. He took her hands,

he held them both against his chest, pressed his own upon them. "You do count," he repeated vehemently—"I love you. I love you before everything, and when I see you suffer it makes things ten times worse for me."

Naomi had asked for an explicit statement. She had received it. She was still the first consideration to her husband—but she let that pass. She fastened on the admission that she was hurting him in a new way. Again what was best in her turned against her. Even remorse was a two-edged sword, and if one edge cut herself, the other wounded him.

"Don't," she protested, "don't be hurt for me. Don't be sorry for me. I want to suffer too. I am glad of every pang."

And the man who heard her bent his head reverently. He thought that she meant that he and she were so much one, that she would rather go along the road to Calvary with him than down the pleasant way by herself. He put his arms about her, he held her close. If there had been any reticence, any withdrawing, that was past. Out of the very fullness of his heart Roger protested quickly and vehemently that Naomi had been his own support, the one light star in his darkened sky, that without her he couldn't have endured. "If I didn't believe in you, worship you, I should have ended myself long before this," he assured her.

They were so occupied one with the other, that neither of them had heard the door open stealthily, that neither of them knew that Chi Lung had glided into the room, that he was standing there, eavesdropping shamelessly. The old man had learned that Roger and his wife were alone, he had heard the murmur of their voices. He knew that at such a moment, with the chart and all it implied imminent before them, whatever they were saying must have its significance. It would define the exact, not the accepted position of Naomi in Roger's life. The old Chinaman, withheld by no scruples, would hear with his own ears, would see with his own eyes.

Every word, every action confirmed Lady de la Haye's testimony. His dead friend's widow had spoken truly.

Naomi's love was as necessary to Roger's happiness as his vindication.

"Each gambler backs his own dice," declared his Excellency aloud, "each priest upholds his own shrine," and when Naomi and Roger turned, not a little startled, the old man looked from one to the other of them, tucked his hands into his sleeves, and remarked, "He who learns unawares, digests facts, not compliments."

"I never heard your Excellency come in," Roger protested, not a little annoyed to think that his moment of expansiveness had had its witness; as for Naomi she slipped aside and backed down by the fireplace. For the moment Chi Lung seemed to have forgotten her.

"My son," said the old man, "I looked for the crows, the owl, and maybe the cuckoo, and lo! I found but the dove and her mate."

"The others will be here directly," Roger answered. "Littleport has gone to tell them all."

He had hardly said that before Billy Hirst came in. He and Roger had had a few words apart, and the result of an embarrassed explanation on Roger's part was that no one was more eager to help him than Billy. It seemed to that erratic wanderer, who was at heart one of the most generous of men, that if Roger could imagine such a possibility of a friend then, indeed, he must be so driven that he required all the help that friend in particular could give him.

The others followed quickly, and with them came Carson the detective. Naomi heard the door open and shut, but she hardly realized who entered. Her eyes, her mind were fixed on the old Chinaman. He had settled himself in a big armchair, his hands were clasped, his eyes were blinking, but she felt that he was waiting, watching—for what?

The girl rocked and clutched on to the mantelpiece. Was her enemy going to speak now, before the inquisition began, or would he let the farce go on and speak in his own good time? She swayed slightly, gasped. She must, she would keep still, yet a touch on her arm so startled her, that she sprang aside as if she expected a blow.

"Naomi dear, what is it?" Amabelle asked anxiously, but Roger's wife looked not at Roger's mother, but to that little neutral-tinted man, who had seated himself by the table, and she knew, for her wits were sharpened by terror, that her start, her exclamation had not gone unmarked by the detective.

All the same, when someone indicated that she should move up nearer the table, she walked quietly, firmly to the appointed seat.

The guests were all arranged in a semicircle, save Chi Lung, and he sat in the great armchair at the end of the desk, as if, when it came to it, he, and he alone, had the right to the place of a judge. Carson was at the writing-table, Roger was standing up beside him. Naomi had Amabelle on the one hand, Victoria at the other side.

Then there followed a moment's silence. Everyone remained stock-still, as if they were all marionettes who had simultaneously lost their strings. There was not a cough, not so much as the rustle of a woman's skirts. It was not until the silence was growing almost unbearable that Roger began to speak.

"My friends," he said, "I believe that not one of you would do or lend your help to such a piece of dishonor, of treachery" (Naomi winced at his words). "But because you are innocent, I know you will help me as much as you can. As you all know, the facts of the case as far as we have learned them are this:—The contents of the memorandum were stolen somehow, and sold to the press by a scoundrel called Hermann Strum. The terms of the agreement were made public twelve hours after the document had been signed in this very room. Mr. Carson here has made careful investigations and is convinced that the accomplice, he who copied the memorandum, was someone *inside* the house. Now, the object of this chart is to ascertain the exact movements of each person during the whole of that afternoon and evening, and we hope by doing this to light upon some clue which will eventually help us to discover the culprit. Mr. Carson and his men have already filled in all the

columns relating to the servants and other inmates of the house."

"I take it that narrows it to one of *us*," said Billy drily.

"No, no," said Roger, "I wouldn't suggest——"

"Oh, don't apologize. You can't afford to be polite at this stage," commented Billy. "I don't mind personally being among the 'suspects'——" He looked up and passed on his assertion with a gesture.

"*Ma foi! non—non—non plus.* . . . My horrible past is open to all," declared Armand.

"Exactly what I think," said Paul. "We're all of us here for one thing only—to see you cleared, Roger."

Roger thanked them briefly. So far so good. Carson's eyes had slowly traveled from face to face while these preliminaries had taken place, and he made a note of the fact that Chi Lung had said nothing in answer to Roger's appeal and apology.

"Sir Roger," he said, "will you please tell us exactly what happened after the memorandum had been signed?"

"The memorandum in Chinese characters was put into this drawer," Roger answered, and he pulled open a drawer in the Chinese desk. "His Excellency can testify that he laid it in there himself, and Mr. Marketel that he saw it put there."

"That is correct," confirmed Paul.

The Oriental was not so direct, but equally affirmative.

"This hand may be the hand of him with wearied veins and tired sinews," he said; "none the less it can do its duty yet, and it neither dropped the paper on the floor nor left it lying on the table."

Carson turned again to Roger.

"And then?"

"I turned the lock and put the key into my pocket, but as I have told you already the spring may not have worked, the drawer may have been unlocked all the while; but thinking it was secured, I left the room by the garden door," and he pointed to the door in question as he spoke.

"Did anyone lock the door after you?" asked Carson.

"Yes, Mr. Marketel did."

Carson looked at Paul, who nodded.

"What did you do then, Sir Roger?"

"I cut across to my motor which was waiting by Water Lane and came up the drive to the front. I wanted to suggest that I had not been near the house during the last half-hour."

"Quite so. And you, Mr. Marketel, what did you do with the key after you had locked the door?"

"I left it turned in the lock." Then, as he guessed what the detective was aiming at, Paul added emphatically, "It certainly was not tampered with. We examined it afterwards."

"That does away with the possibility that some stranger might have got in with a duplicate key after you had left," Carson decided. "What about that door?" And he pointed towards the door leading into the salon.

"When his Excellency and I went out, his Excellency locked it and took the key away in his sleeve," answered Paul.

"So I understood," said Carson, "but," and he dropped his words out slowly, "will it surprise you to hear that the keys of the two doors of the salon are duplicates?"

"It does surprise me," Paul answered. He saw all the possibilities the fact opened up. "But," he asked, "taking it for granted that the thief knew what I did not, and I am an old habitué of the house, taking it for granted that he used the duplicate key, when did he get in to do it?"

"Shall we say directly after you left?" answered the detective smoothly.

"That's impossible," dissented Roger. "No stranger could have entered the house unseen."

"Was there anyone in the salon when you and his Excellency came out, Mr. Marketel?" asked Carson, shifting the ground of inquiry, as Roger supposed, and he looked first at Paul, and then at Chi Lung.

"No one as far as I saw," answered Paul promptly.

"Your Excellency?"

"My old eyes found nothing to disturb their serenity," Chi Lung muttered.

Carson nodded to himself. He looked down at the chart.

"I see tea was served on the terrace," he commented. He raised himself quickly.

"Was everyone there?" he asked, fixing his glance on Amabelle.

"All but those whose movements you have investigated already," she said.

"No! no! *pardon!*" interjected Armand. "You forget. When Roger go from tea I follow to offer him my motor."

"And Sir Roger refused?" Carson asked.

"He told me he prefer his own," the little man answered.

"Then you went directly back on to the terrace?"

"No," said Armand.

"Please explain what you did next?" the detective asked.

Armand drew back a pace. He felt as if he were being dragged to a given point—and he did not like the sensation.

"*Ma foi,* Monsieur," he said, "I know nothing that will help you."

Carson smiled amicably. This witness might be useful as a witness, but he was certainly in no way actively concerned. His very recalcitrance proved that.

"But you have not told me where you went when Sir Roger would not accept your offer," the detective persisted.

"*Ma foi,* Monsieur," the little man retorted, "I stay there."

"In the salon?"

"*Parfaitement,* yes!"

"How long?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"*Vingt minutes!* a half-hour perhaps."

"You would have seen anyone who came in either by the window or the door?"

"Certainly."

"Could anyone have been hiding in the room?" Carson continued.

"Hiding!" exclaimed Paul Marketel.

"Behind the curtains, for instance," the detective explained.

"No! no!" returned Armand, "no one was behind the curtains."

"You are sure?"

"Positive."

"Positive, why?"

"Because I moved them."

"You moved the curtains?"

"*Bien sûr.* For the light. To have all the light for the work."

"Work! What work?" demanded the detective sharply.

Roger stepped a pace forward. The flush was upon his face, his eyes were unnaturally bright. He saw that Carson seemed to consider that he was getting at an important point. All the others saw it too. The strain was so tense that it hurt as if it had been physical pain, and Naomi, unable to sit still, pushed her chair back out of the circle and rose.

The detective repeated his question, and Armand liked his tone even less than before.

"Work," the Frenchman echoed shortly—"the photographs, of course."

"Photographs," began Roger.

But Carson brought his hand down on the table with a rap.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he observed, addressing the assembly, "there is nothing of which you cannot take a copy with a camera."

"But," objected Armand, springing forward, and seeing all the detective implied—"*Par exemple!* You do not think that I——"

"My good Sir," returned the detective soothingly, "don't run away with the idea that this is any reflection on you. You are innocent. I'll stake my word on that."

"Thank you," retorted Armand, still unmollified.

"But don't you see," the detective went on, "that this is

a point of vital importance? You were taking photographs —of what?"

"Of the room. The *chinoiserie.*"

"Alone?"

"*Absolument.*"

A less experienced man would have been content with the assertion and passed on to the next point. But Carson knew that nineteen times out of twenty an excitable witness amplifies out of sheer inability to keep still; and the amplification is apt to be more enlightening than the statement. Precisely what the detective had foreseen occurred now.

"*Absolument!* we two—alone," repeated Armand.

"Two!" rapped out Harold Carson, pouncing on that one word—"Two! Who was the other?"

The moment the words had passed his lips, Armand saw what he had done. He had implicated Naomi.

"I regret," he began—"I can say no more."

Naomi herself stepped forward. She knew the movement directed all eyes on her, she heard the little stir as each individual altered his or her position to have a better view of her, but she only looked in one direction. She saw that his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung seemed as impassive as ever. The farce was to go on yet farther, then. Perhaps the old man was waiting for her to incriminate herself. She all but put up her hand and pointed to the bent, huddled figure, she all but cried out, "Ask him, he knows everything." Then that instinct of self-preservation intervened. Did the old Chinaman know as much as he pretended? she asked herself. If she were adroit enough could she not save herself both from him and from Harold Carson?

She pressed one hand to her side, she began to walk towards the table. She was going along quite steadily, she told herself, and she almost laughed at that. She kept on with her eyes carefully fixed before her. She did not wish to look into any face; above all, if she were to give herself a chance, she must not see Roger's eyes.

She paused before the desk near enough to put out her hand and touch it.

"I was in the second salon with Monsieur de Rochecorbon," she announced. "We were taking photographs together."

"You! you!" gasped Roger.

Carson passed his hand once, twice over his face. His experience had taught him again and again that truth is stranger than fiction, but surely here he was coming on a well-nigh incredible thing—still, all along, ever since he had heard of Mrs. Melsham, ever since he had seen Naomi, just this possibility had insisted on presenting itself.

"But why were you taking photographs?" Roger went on.

"For my book. We were using my kodak," Naomi answered, and she turned a little to her husband. "You remember," she jerked out, "you promised to help me to take some of those Canton enamels."

"Yes!" Roger admitted. "I do recollect—something."

"Have you that kodak now, Lady de la Haye?" Carson broke in.

"No," answered Naomi shortly.

"What has become of it?"

"I don't know."

"Let us go back to the photographs," the detective suggested suavely. "When you had finished taking them what did you do with the camera?"

"I tell you I don't know," Naomi reiterated.

"Think," insinuated the detective softly.

"I can't think," Naomi protested.

She looked to right, to left as a hunted rabbit seeks for a hole, and then Victoria rose.

"I can help Lady de la Haye, Mr. Carson," she said, and her tone was a protest. She slipped her hand into Naomi's arm. "Don't you remember, dear," she asked soothingly, "that night you walked in your sleep? You had the cover of a kodak in your hand."

"Had I? Did I? Yes! I suppose so—yes," Naomi

mumbled. She jerked herself free from Victoria's hand; she began to tremble, her lips twitched.

Carson saw all the signs of distress, and the odd man was really moved by them. If it had depended on Harold Carson, the individual, he would have terminated the inquiry then and there, but since it concerned Harold Carson, the detective, he was prepared to pursue the investigation to the bitter end.

"Did you print any of the photographs you took on this occasion?" he asked.

"No! No! They were never printed, the films were all useless," protested Naomi feverishly, and her clenched hands emphasized her words.

"Have you any of them now?"

"No, no, no."

"How many did you take?" went on the relentless voice.

Again the trembling hands went to her head and she pushed back the heavy golden hair. "I—I—don't—remember," she muttered.

Paul bent towards her persuasively.

"Try to think, Naomi," he said encouragingly. "Kodak films are twelve on a roll. Did you finish the roll?"

"No, no—I think not."

"What made you stop?"

"I—I——" Naomi stuttered, and everyone present was conscious how she struggled for expression—or for repression.

Amabelle rose to move to her daughter-in-law.

"Must this go on?" she was about to say to the detective, when old Chi Lung bent forward and touched her arm.

"When the Yellow River is in flood, the strongest junk is torn from its anchor," he warned her.

Lady de la Haye pulled up. Silently she turned to the old man, but Naomi began to speak again.

"Littleport came in to say my mother was here," she made herself explain.

"There!" broke in Roger, and in his excitement he

passed round the table and stood close by his wife—"there! Don't you see? We have it now. The camera was left in the room. Someone used it while she was talking to her mother."

"Yes, yes," broke in Naomi. A gleam of hope came into her eyes. If this passed, if this was recorded on the chart, then indeed she might have a chance of escape. Involuntarily she looked at Armand de Rochecorbon. The glance puzzled the little man, but he answered it promptly.

"I left the room to answer my letters—I did not see the camera again."

A sigh of relief fluttered from Naomi's lips, but it was hardly on its way before the golden-haired woman drew back on herself again.

"Dear!" amended Amabelle, "you forget. You are making a mistake. Don't you recollect? You did not go to your mother. She came to you in the salon."

Roger's wife looked back speechless. All the other occupants of the room were watching, waiting. She opened her lips, and shut them again. She was telling herself that the little man with the penetrating eyes and neutral air would take up Lady de la Haye's assertion, he would find out the exact moment her mother was shown into the salon; there must come the question where was she, Naomi herself, where was her mother, when Chi Lung and Paul Marketel came through the room. The admission that they were hiding behind the screen would be extorted, and after that —the inference to be drawn from it?"

She let her arms fall helplessly to her sides.

"Lady de la Haye—when did you put your camera down —after your mother left you, or before?" was the first question Carson asked.

"I cannot remember," Naomi answered dully.

"Think," urged Roger, and he turned on his wife, he clutched her arm. "Think," he urged, "think, dear! Think."

She shook him off as if he angered her.

"I can't think," she protested vehemently. "How can I?

I get confused. Roger, don't question me any more. I can't bear it."

She broke away from him, but Roger followed as quickly as she retreated.

"Naomi," he demanded. "You must know what you did with that camera. You must remember. It is vital for us to know. If we can trace that camera, if we can find who used it, then we have the thief and I shall be cleared. Do you hear?" he went on—"I shall be cleared. Naomi," and regardless of her starting eyes, of her blanched face, he shook her almost roughly—"Naomi, it's all in your hands. For God's sake don't fail me! Think!"

She lifted her head, looked once at the man she loved. She began to whimper, to moan. Obviously she was at the last gasp, incapable of clear speech, perhaps of connected thought. Amabelle started forward.

"*Ma foi!* this is too much," Armand protested.

Billy laid hold on Roger and pulled him round. But Carson did an odd thing. He pushed the chart aside, with so decided a movement that it slid off the table on to the floor. The detective let it lie there. Evidently he considered its use at an end. He sat back watching—and waiting.

Then a single authoritative word was flung into the silence.

"Peace!" commanded his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung. "Noble son of a blessed father gone to live in the Happy Vale of Ancestral Longevity," he said, turning to Roger, "it is well to be silent long, that when speech comes all may attend to it. Know then," and the old man threw up his head proudly, "that Chi Lung sold the memorandum to the sheets of intelligence."

"You!" came from everyone present save only Naomi.

"You!" took up Roger—"you sold the memorandum to Hermann Strum?"

"Even I," affirmed the old man.

Lady de la Haye turned about; there was incredulity on her face.

"Your Excellency," she protested, "I don't believe——"

"Even I," declared the Chinaman again, and far from being abashed he stared fixedly at the wife of his most valued friend, as if bidding her accept something; or refrain from something.

For a moment the weary, oblique eyes held the widely open gray ones. The very attitude of these two, the pivots of the whole scene, silenced the others. Instinctively each spectator realized that between these two was passing something they could neither weigh nor fathom.

Then Roger flung quickly round.

"You!" he began to Chi Lung. "You! By Heaven! you called yourself my father's friend. My father trusted you. You——"

"When wrath speaks wisdom veils her face," the old man remarked, and deliberately, all his air of detachment back on him, he stroked his beard.

"Good God!" muttered Roger. This very calmness exasperated him, this imperturbability drove him nearly wild. He raised his right arm, and held it extended. "As long as I live I'll never trust a Chinaman again," he swore.

Chi Lung looked hard back at him. He smiled; as one smiles indulgently at a foolish child; then slowly, deliberately, he began to shuffle to the door.

It was then that Naomi roused herself. The old Chinaman had saved her at the expense of his own reputation. Her greatest enemy had taken her sin on himself. She knew this vaguely, but she could not grasp it in its full scope. The revulsion was too sudden, too overpowering. Yet, some instinct told her that before the old man left the room she had something to do. She could not stand there and just accept this sacrifice. She stretched out both her hands. She tried to totter towards the old man. He saw the movement, the appeal. He answered it with one quick, significant look. Then, having expressed himself voicelessly, his Excellency passed on.

Naomi saw him go. It was true! true! true! that this

bent old man had spared her, had saved her. She could go on as Roger's wife now—she—she—she——

The room began to whirl before her eyes. With a long, inarticulate cry, Naomi fell to the ground.

Roger and Victoria were down by her in a moment. Paul suggested smelling salts, Billy rushed off shouting aloud for water, but Amabelle hardly moved. She watched the shuffling figure leave the room. She heard the door close softly and, as she stood, drop by drop the blood seemed to recede from her cheeks, her lips; and then, with a quick movement as if she were pushing that which she would not look on from her, she hurried to the window, threw it open, and hastened out.

One other person bestowed his attention upon Chi Lung and not on Naomi. Carson watched the old man, saw the look he gave Roger's face, and the little man's face softened.

"One never can tell what an Oriental will do," the astute detective muttered to himself, and there was reverence, not exasperation, in his tone.

CHAPTER XXIV

His Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung found himself alone in the Queen Anne parlor which was so intimately connected with the one woman who (whether the old man admitted it or not) he respected, took counsel with, and sometimes deferred to.

It is doubtful if the Chinaman, helped by his national habit of complacently demonstrating that a thing cannot be, and then as complacently dealing with the same proposition as one of the accepted facts of life, was even aware of his equivocal position.

Had he been he would neither have troubled about it, nor made excuses for it. The Celestials are always amused by that rigidity of the West which goes under the name of consistency. As often as they meet it, and it inconveniences them, they oppose to it what a Sinalogue calls "flexible inflexibility," and they do it with a bland smile, firmly persuaded of their superiority.

So, on this particular afternoon, not half an hour after his tremendous admission in Roger's study, the spare old man sat stiff and upright in one of the shining, curved-backed chairs, with his feet planted straight before him, with his hands tucked into the sleeves of his coat, with his face turned upon the portrait of Sir Arthur de la Haye which stood on the top of the walnut writing-bureau.

To Chi Lung that portrait was the center of the room, as an image is the center of a shrine.

The odd, stiff figure sat very still, staring with unblinking eyes at the picture which showed the clever, alert European face.

His Excellency sat in the same attitude for quite a long time. Then he rose, stretched out his hand and waved it in the air.

He went on with his pantomime. He made as if he were burning joss sticks, as if he were setting alight the paper substitutes which, by another odd turn of the Celestial mind, are used to deceive the spirits of the departed into thinking that real offerings have been consumed on the burial-ground, and, having once again bowed himself down, his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung relapsed into his former attitude.

The old man had just done one of those things which not only break up a man's private life but wreck his official career as well.

He had announced publicly that he was guilty of a particularly barefaced piece of double-dealing. He had, according to his own confession, violated that code of diplomatic honor which Europe has laid down, and which the East—willy-nilly—has been forced to accept. But more than that, he had fallen below the standard of straight dealing and commercial honesty which sets his own country apart, among other nations of the East, and, as the Chinaman's own government had been the losers by the premature publishing of the Chinese memorandum, the obvious inference was that the old man had done it for personal gain.

In China, that country of fruitful contradictions, the private squeeze flourishes, side by side with the high standard of commercial integrity, so that it was not wholly out of keeping with the habit of that blue-gowned race that Chi Lung should have accepted a bribe—say to drop his memorandum out of his coat pocket or leave it on the table for ten minutes.

But the thing that his Excellency—a mandarin with a red button, the bearer of the peacock's feather and the yellow jacket—would have to take into consideration was that his usefulness in Europe was at an end. Chi Lung had been a power in London, Paris, Rome, just because (as they said in Pekin of a certain British administrator) "he was a colossal honest devil." Now, just as Roger had reproached the old man, hotly casting off the esteem, the

friendship, of a lifetime, just as Armand de Rochecorbon had stalked away, making no secret of his attitude, so this Western world—both the diplomatic and financial—would pass the old man by. He must have realized that. One of the shrewdest sons of a shrewd race could not but be aware of his own position, and yet he sat on in that high-backed chair in the white room as though time didn't exist, as though there were nothing, either past or to come, to disturb his equanimity. The only clue to his thoughts was the fact that the oblique eyes never left the photograph of Sir Arthur de la Haye.

At length the interruption which his Excellency had perhaps been expecting came to pass.

The door opened hurriedly, hastily, and Naomi came into the room. She closed the door carefully and paused a moment, timidly, uncertainly, half-hoping that the stiff figure in the long frock coat would turn towards her or speak—and then, as nothing happened, Naomi, with downcast eyes and dragging steps approached the immovable figure.

When she was right in front of him she stopped, and, holding out a little ivory carving representing the three monkeys of Discretion, said falteringly:

"You sent me this?"

"It is the emblem of our wisdom," replied the old man. "Do you know what it means?"

She shook her head.

"It means silence," explained his Excellency.

"Silence," repeated Naomi. "No—no—your Excellency, you do not know——"

"I know all," interposed Chi Lung, as abrupt as the most laconic Englishman for once.

Naomi shuddered. She stood still. It was growing very gray in the white room, the shadows were creeping out of all the corners, but there was something more than a mist before Naomi's eyes, she was stunned—she felt as helpless as a bird fluttering in a snare.

"All," she repeated at length. "You know all?"

"Even so," answered his Excellency. "Hermann Strum spoke at my bidding."

At the mention of that name the girl started to tremble.

"Ah. Suppose—suppose he comes back and tells Roger——" she gasped and her eyes widened.

"Peace—fool," the old man interrupted. "Do I cut off the tail of a dog and forget his head?"

Naomi gazed at him uncomprehendingly. Chi Lung smiled sardonically, and fumbling in his sleeve he brought out a cable which he thrust into the hand of Roger's wife.

"Read," he commanded. "Strum will not return. Read."

Naomi took the sheet with the lengths of blue tape pasted on to it, as if she were afraid it might burn her. She neither glanced at the direction nor the date, she only read the message:

"Hermann Strum assassinated in German consulate, Teheran. Assassin unknown."

The sheet fluttered out of her hand, and the old Chinaman bent and picked it up.

"Assassin unknown," he repeated unctuously. "In Teheran; this poor worm sent him there. His neck was too long for his head."

For one moment relief flooded her being; she was free, Hermann Strum was dead; but the next minute she remembered that now the fact of Hermann Strum's death changed nothing. Her reason for seeking the old Chinaman was still there.

"Your Excellency," she began, "you never liked me, you were angry because Roger married me. I can at least remove that cause of your displeasure—I mean to go away—I do not intend ever to see Roger again. But I cannot tell him myself what I have done, I cannot watch his face while he learns that I, his wife, am to blame for all he has suffered. I have written out a confession—I have

brought it here with me now. It completely clears you, your Excellency. Will you give it to Roger yourself?"

She held out a letter.

The old man took it. He held it by one corner, between his thumb and his first finger.

"Everything is written here?" he asked.

"Everything," faltered Naomi.

All at once her trembling increased, her knees began to knock together—her whole body to shake. She had suddenly realized exactly what she had done; she had dispossessed herself—she had arranged for her own casting forth.

Again that feeling of unutterable loneliness swept over her.

"Your Excellency," she ventured, and her voice had an appeal in it now—perhaps she could make the old man understand why she had acted as she had done. "All I do now, I do because I love Roger better than myself, but all I did before was from the same motive. I was driven by what I felt for Roger, by the fear of losing all the love he was ready to bestow on me, until I hardly knew right from wrong, until I could think of only that one thing. I photographed the Chinese memorandum because Roger was more than anything or anyone in this world to me. That was my sole, my only reason. It seemed the only way to keep him—I could not lose him."

Her voice broke, and through her tears she looked at the expressionless face. She saw no sign of understanding there. Still she waited, her eyes on the cold, almost lifeless mask. She seemed unaware that tears were coursing unheeded down her cheeks. She waited for a word—a word of understanding, and it came in the shape she least expected.

Deliberately—that there might be no mistake about the purpose of the action—his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung tore the envelope in two.

"What are you doing?" exclaimed Naomi. "Why are you doing that?" and she would have stopped him, but he pushed her aside.

"Justice demands but one culprit," the old man declared. "Chi Lung has provided."

"But," Naomi stammered, "it is I who am guilty. I must bear my own punishment. Why should you suffer for me?"

"For you?" retorted Chi Lung. He folded his hands and laughed slowly, contemptuously. Again he conveyed an intimation of the gulf that, in his opinion, existed between himself and this woman.

Naomi had once heard more of a scene between her mother and a man driven to plain speaking than was good for the ears of any daughter. Neither the anger nor the contempt had been lost on her, but there was this difference between that man's upbraiding and Chi Lung's laughter. All through the stream of bitterness ran the implication that Mrs. Melsham had fallen below the level expected of her sex, whereas, here, the Chinaman seemed to be telling Naomi that for once a white woman stripped of her trappings, stripped of the protection and the glamor that the cult of many centuries had wrapped about her, was but reverting to type, was but behaving as he expected a mere woman to behave.

"Do you think," the old man demanded presently, "that my tongue would trouble itself to say weighty words for such as you? Did you dream, in your foolish presumption, that I would invent riddles to turn men's minds away from you?"

Naomi shrank away from him—how he hated her!

"To me you are as worthless as a cracked pot on a refuse heap, but to Roger you are a Pearl of Price. All barbarians are mad; even Roger, whom I love as if he were my own son, has not escaped this scourge of foolishness. In our land 'tis but a mad dog that runs after its own tail; here, man in his folly runs after his lesser half—a woman. It pleases Roger to call you by his honorable name, therefore you must be spared to him. I came with rejoicing (for my hour had come), to lay you low, but behold, to lop off the head of the Lily Flower on the

Temple Pond would break the heart of the Temple Keeper."

A little glow of feeling came back into her heart, she could understand such self-immolation, and because a veil was temporarily thrust between her consciousness and her fall a flicker of courage came back to her.

"I understand," she returned, speaking slowly, steadily; "you thought of Roger first—you hoped in that way to give him peace of mind. It was noble of you, and I thank you."

"You," thrust in the Chinaman.

Naomi gave the old man no time for another word.

"But I cannot let Roger think you guilty," she went on steadily.

"A wrong was done, a wrong has been righted," retorted Chi Lung loftily—"that is enough."

"That is not enough," Naomi persisted. "I must bear the weight of my own sin,—I must take my punishment openly."

"And hurt Roger ten times more than he was hurt before!" the old man exclaimed.

Naomi winced. It was precisely this reflection which had sealed her lips ever since she returned from Italy.

"In this land of foolishness," Chi Lung went on, "a man may be undone by the levity of his own home, and he may not even use the sack or the rope to purge himself of the cause of the offense."

Naomi dropped her head. That was true also. Had she not thought it all out herself on that train journey to Aix?

"What am I to do?" she wailed.

The old Chinaman told her in a very few words.

"If you love yourself better than Roger," he said to her—"speak. If you love Roger better than yourself—keep silence."

Naomi let her arms fall to her side. The old man had put the case as it really was. The few, pregnant words, to be sure, contravened one of the first articles of the accepted ethical code of the West—confession takes precedence there—but is there ever a rule without exceptions? Besides, current formulae are evolved for the multitude, and

the many must of necessity be commonplace. Whatever else it might or might not have been, Naomi's sin had come out of something large, something overpowering, and the consequences it entailed were of the same magnitude. The payment for it (for wrongdoing is a debtor who exacts cash down) must be on the same scale.

Something of this—not formulated, of course, in any neat or cut terms—hurried through Naomi's mind. She saw, if she accepted this decision, what was before her.

"To live a lie all my life," she whispered, "to take what is not my due . . . to allow another to suffer for that which I have done. . . . I can't do it."

Again, it seemed to her she could not pay the price, and then Roger's face rose before her and her love welled up anew and her courage came back to her. She knew it would not be a small thing she undertook, she foresaw the daily, hourly crucifixion which she would be called upon to endure for many years to come, perhaps for the rest of her life. She raised her head to speak, but before she could say anything Chi Lung's outstretched hand pointed to the door. She was not even to give her decision in words—it was taken for granted.

Humbled to the dust, suffering both physically and mentally, she groped her way to the door.

When she had gone Chi Lung went up to the table. He took up Sir Arthur's picture, lifted it as though he were performing a rite, then setting it back he bowed before it once, until his lean old frame was almost bent double.

Amabelle had spent the last hour pacing up and down the terrace. Her amazement had given way to conjecture. She could not believe that any bribe would have made Chi Lung sacrifice the fruits of a lifetime's work. Besides, she had had such faith in him and his devotion for all the members of her family—at least for all except Naomi; he had never included her in the family and of late the enmity had become more marked. That scene on his arrival at Zouche came back to her; it had been strange; the girl had ob-

viously been afraid, and she was not nervous by nature. The old man had been insolent, insulting. Had his veiled allusions meant anything? Many little incidents unnoticed at the time now came back to her with a new meaning. Finally she came to the scene that had just taken place. There had seemed no doubt to the onlookers that Naomi knew more than she would say, everybody had felt it; the tension had become almost unbearable when Chi Lung had so unexpectedly stepped in with his avowal.

Was Naomi guilty? and did he know it? Could she be? And if so why should the old man save the girl whom he hated? Why should he sacrifice himself? The idea was preposterous. Amabelle repeated to herself that it was fantastic, absurd, that it was out of all keeping with the Celestial habits of conduct; and yet—the doubt that had been insinuating itself into her mind all this day was not removed. It worked, enlarged, and persisted. It presented first this trifle to her, and then that.

In her perplexity Amabelle stood still just outside the French windows of the Queen Anne parlor, raised her head, and unconsciously looked into the room. In a flash she had her answer. She saw her old friend dismiss her daughter-in-law. She saw the continuity of the action. Her hand was on the latch of the window, her breath was coming more quickly. She was so amazed, and then the old man turned and bent low before her husband's picture. In a flash Amabelle de la Haye understood. Chi Lung was innocent. Naomi was guilty, but the Chinaman had saved Naomi for Roger's sake. At last, after all these years of waiting, he had paid his debt of gratitude. She pushed open the window and hurried into the room.

"Your Excellency!" she exclaimed. "What have you done?"

The old man put up his hand.

"There is a time for speech—there is a time for silence," he told her. "But silence is of the gods, only monkeys chatter."

Though she had been sure that it was so, Chi Lung's

direct avowal seemed to bring home to Amabelle all the enormity of the offense. It was intolerable that anyone connected with Roger, and indirectly with Roger's father, could have done such a thing.

Chi Lung saw the sudden flush, the curve of the lips, the flash in the eyes which habitually shone with such a gentle light. He saw that his sacrifice might be rendered useless unless he could succeed in making his dead friend's wife see with his eyes.

"The mother spoke honey of the son's wife," he said softly.

Amabelle was silent.

"The mother-in-law pointed out to this worthless one that Roger's wife was as dear to him as his own life."

The white-haired woman raised her head. Her lips half opened, it was evident she was about to dissent, perhaps to protest, as Naomi had protested.

"You and I spoke the same words," the old man went on smoothly, evidently anticipating her. "They came out of your mouth and I said them again, but they had a twin birth, for they were born in my heart as well as in yours. Your honorable voice made protest that you would give Roger all you had, and my poor tongue formed just the same speech—'all we had.'"

Amabelle stood motionless. She had but a moment in which to determine what she must do. Chi Lung had evidently secured Naomi's silence, he was asking her for hers too. She had to determine whether she would acquiesce or denounce, but if she chose the former she must do much more than merely accept. Her conduct to Naomi must be generous, not grudging. She must not only tolerate, she must forgive. There must be no magnanimous superiority in her mind, there must be that great understanding which is a bond in itself.

A less large-minded woman would have chosen the accepted course and plumed herself on her righteous conduct, for the narrow-minded always seem in such a hurry for the Day of Judgment that they must needs anticipate it, but to

Amabelle one thing was clear—it behooved her to follow in Chi Lung's footsteps.

With her fine knowledge of what would be most acceptable to the Oriental, she made the decision which would affect her whole life without even alluding to it directly.

"What are you going to do yourself, your Excellency?" she asked.

"Is not the sum of my labors accomplished?" the old man answered. "I leave for Pekin tonight."

"But," she interposed solicitously, "will you be safe there?" The old man smiled unconcernedly. When he had parted with so much, what mattered one breath, more or less, drawn out of a body that ultimately must return to Mother Earth?

"The old Buddha is wise," he said (referring to the Dowager Empress reigning at this time, by the name which those who saw her most pleasing side bestowed on her).

Then as if to counterbalance praise bestowed on a woman, he added in his usual manner:

"The gods are drunk, sometimes they put the brains of a man into the head of a woman."

The jibe seemed to put an end to the discussion. Chi Lung turned away and left Amabelle. He pulled an armchair to the fire and sat down on it, with his back to the room.

Lady de la Haye knew that she was expected to go away, and never to open the subject again.

She went towards the door, but, with her arm outstretched to open it, she looked back, and suddenly felt she could not leave him thus.

"Your Excellency," she persisted, as she hurried up to him. "You and I cannot part like this. I understand, and I have come back to lay my gratitude at your feet."

The old man rose. He put out his thin hand. He held hers.

"The gift," he said, "warms my old heart—but it is a gift. The obligation to repay belonged to this poor worm."

He looked at Roger's mother for a long minute.

"There will be flowers in Roger's path," he said.

"What you wish me to do, I shall do," Amabelle answered. "All will be well with him, your Excellency—but—for her?"

"Peace," interposed the old man, "all will be well for her too—out of the twilight has blossomed a flower—the flower of sacrifice for another. Cherish it."

Lady de la Haye bowed her head. She accepted the trust as Naomi had accepted the burden.

Before another word could be said by either, Paul Marketel entered the room. He came to seek Lady de la Haye; he wanted, if possible, to discuss with her the extraordinary scene which had taken place in the Chinese Room. At the sight of Chi Lung and Lady de la Haye he drew back, he looked from one to the other in astonishment. He too had seen things during the scene in the Chinese writing-room that had amazed him; no man of his acumen could have missed them—and now, there was this collusion, this friendliness between the very two who, if things had been as they seemed to be, should have been separated by scorn, by enmity.

"I do not understand——" he blurted out.

The old Chinaman rose. He pattered up to the big man.

"When youth takes a scorpion for his bedfellow," his Excellency remarked, "then the aged go out on the roof."

The speech left Paul even more perplexed than before—or rather he was growing still more sure, but the certainty was so strange he could not admit it. Slowly his eyes came back to Lady de la Haye. He found her glance awaiting him.

"Paul," said the white-haired woman softly, "you are an old friend—his Excellency is a still older friend."

Paul Marketel understood. A curtain had been lifted, a curtain had been lowered. This was not a thing to talk about; it was a thing to accept.

The decisions of Fate come out of the Unknown, and the wise bow before them—only the puny protest.

An hour later Paul Marketel, driving his own car, with his Excellency the Marquis Chi Lung seated beside him, passed along the road from Zouche to London. The financier had proposed that he should leave Victoria at Zouche for a few days and drive the old man back, and Amabelle had gratefully accepted his suggestion.

The day was ending with a glory which had been denied to its hours of light, for the sky in the west was suffused with a glow of vivid rose and carmine. The crimson brightness seemed to struggle with the darkness and endeavor to drive it back. It mingled with the purple veil of night and turned it into a haze shaded from red to orange.

Every object, as the car raced along, was touched by this light, was warmed by it. It was as if a great fire burned below the horizon and its glow shot up high into the heavens, save that here there was nothing fierce or cruel. It seemed to speak of warmth without destruction, of a great brightness that would not consume.

To Paul, who, though a man of business, was intensely sensitive to all things beautiful, the gorgeous sunset, the dark patches between the trees through which the white cottages—whose lighted windows made spots of brightness in the gathering dusk—seemed havens of peace, and the distant murmur of cheerful human voices conveyed a message of hope and happiness.

They sat in silence, side by side, he and the disgraced Chinese diplomat, until they came upon one of those bonfires that flame in the fields in autumn. The leaping tongues of flame roused Chi Lung. He turned to Paul, and touched him on the sleeve:

"May there be length of days in your honorable house," he said, apparently inconsequently.

Marketel looked round quickly, but the old man had already resumed his original attitude. He was again sitting upright, with his hands tucked into his sleeves.

The field fire had been left miles behind, the light had faded in the west, the night had dropped its pall of dark-

ness over tree and earth, when Chi Lung next found his voice:

"O Man of Many Ingots of Gold and Silver," he said slowly, "this poor worm would have liked to raise his despicable eyes to the majestic countenance of your honorable father."

Paul turned suddenly and stooped towards the spare old man.

"Your Excellency," he said, as a son might speak to his father, "it grows colder—your cape ought to be fastened round your throat."

And, speaking thus, he put out one hand, and very gently brought the worn old cape close up under the old man's chin.

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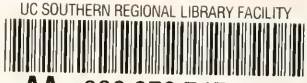
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